Embodied Desire: Song of Songs and Body Theology

by
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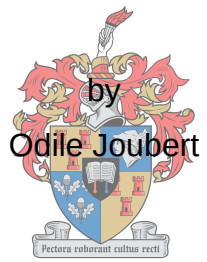

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Declaration

By submitting this thesis, I declare that the entirely of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the authorship owner thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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Abstract

South Africans are confronted on a daily basis with undeniable power structures shaped by patriarchy, demenial language, gender inequality, cultures, traditions and ideology which not only victimises the oppressed, but also victimising the oppressors themselves. These acts of victimisation and injustice are not simply shaped by history and its abusive Body Theology, but are spurred on by a distorted Body-and-Sexual Theology and the abuse of biblical texts. Social behaviour as found in the small town of Beaufort West, riddled with various challenges, is shaped and even 'scripted' by perceptions, internalised language and ideologies, normalised and passed on within the community. The impact of this pre-determined and 'script' identity markers, specifically of the Beaufort West community, is clearly seen in the manner in which individuals and groups are categorised, sexual expectations are presented and traditional morality is shaped by personal preference. The normalisation of social hierarchy, patriarchy, gender inequality, demenial language and sexual expectations pre-determines humanly well-being, value and morality as no individual is completely free from ideology and its misrepresentation. The normalisation of such 'scripted' behaviour in a community such as Beaufort West, flowing from societal influence, is not a twenty-first century phenomenon, but is deeply rooted in the biblical and historical comprehension of the human body. Contemporary individuals share a great amount with ancient individuals when dealing with social normality, hierarchy, patriarchy, humanly well-being and the intoxicating power of desire in human lives. A great amount of socialisation processes' is involved in desire which is more than often 'scripted' by the media through various onslaughts of movies, advertisements and even cultural messages. It is by understanding the shaping and complexity of human well-being and desire that the unquestionable value of the Song of Songs comes into play, as the study of the Biblical text explores the importance of desire and its force in life. The importance of the Song of Songs for the contemporary world lies in its exploration of desire, Body Theology, gender and sexuality, investigating, probing and emphasising vulnerability. Such an understanding of the Song of Songs leads to a morality that is not legalistic in nature but that is receptive to the contemporary world and its legislations. The aim of this study is therefore to explore the history of Body-and-Sexual Theology, too grasp an understanding of the complexity of sex, sexuality and gender, too wrestle with the Song of Songs and its *wasf* texts and thus striving to

see if such a study is of any significance to an analogously ‘scripted’ twenty-first century community such as Beaufort West. The importance of human well-being is not to be ignored as such well-being is deeply intertwined with human dignity, fighting for a healthy, God-intended life and society. As bodyselves humanity is created to experience cognitive, physical, emotional and spiritual needs, striving for intimate communion with God, the natural world and fellow humans.

Opsomming

Suid-Afrikaners word daagliks gekonfronteer met onmiskenbare magstrukture, gevorm deur patriargie, vernederende taal gebruik, 'gender' ongelykheid, kulture, tradisies en ideologieë wat nie net slagoffers onderdruk nie, maar ook die verdrukkers self onderdruk. Hierdie tekortkoming en onreg is nie net gevorm deur geskiedenis en sy misbruik van Liggaams Teologie nie, maar is aangevuur deur 'n verwronge Liggaam-en-Seksuele Teologie en die misbruik van Bybelse teksgedeeltes. Sosiale gedrag wat weerspieël word in die klein dorpie van Beaufort Wes, deurtrek met verskeie uitdagings, is gevorm deur voorafbepaalde 'samelewingstekste' deur middel van waarnemings, geïnternaliseerde taalgebruik en ideologieë wat genormaliseer en aangeneem word deur die gemeenskap. Die impak van hierdie voorafbepaalde identiteit-merkers, spesifiek van die gemeenskap van Beaufort Wes, is te siene in die wyse waarop individue en selfs groepe geklassifiseer word, seksuele verwagtinge op aangedring word en tradisionele morele waardes deur persoonlike voorkeur gevorm word. Die normalisering van sosiale hiërargie, patriargie, 'gender' ongelykheid, vernederende taalgebruik en seksuele verwagtinge, voorveronderstel menslike (seksuele) welstand, waarde en moraliteite weens geen individu waarlik vry is van die wanvoorstelling van ideologieë nie. Die normalisering van sulke voorafbepaalde gedrag in 'n gemeenskap soos Beaufort Wes, wat spruit vanuit sosiale invloed, is nie 'n een-en-twintigste eeu se verskynsel nie, maar is gefundeer in die Bybelse en historiese verstaan van die menslike liggaam. Moderne individue staan in verhouding met dié van die antieke wêreld wanneer daar omgegaan word met sosiale normaliteit, hiërargie, patriargie, menslike (seksuele) welstand en die bedwelmende mag van begeerte in die menslike lewe. 'n Groot aantal sosialiseringsprosesse is betrokke by begeerte wat voorafbepaal word deur die media, deur middel van verskeie aanslae vanaf films, advertensies en selfs kulturele boodskappe. Dit is deur middel van die verstaan van die vorming en kompleksiteit van menslike (seksuele) welstand en begeerte, dat die onbetwisbare waarde van die boek van Hooglied tot die spel tree. Die bestudering van Hooglied verken ten einde die belangrikheid van begeerte en sy mag in die menslike lewe. Die belangrikheid van Hooglied in die een-en-twintigste eeu waak in die verkenning van begeerte, Liggaams Teologie, gender, seksualiteit, die ondersoek en beklemtoning van kwesbaarheid. Hierdie benadering tot die boek van Hooglied is dus nie 'n tradisionele wetties moralistiese benadering nie, maar is immers

gepas vir die een-en-twintigste eeuse samelewing en sy wetgewing. Die doel van hierdie studie is om die geskiedenis van Liggaam-en-Seksuele Teologie te verken, om ‘n verstaan van die kompleksiteit van seks, seksualiteit en ‘gender’ te verkry, om met Hooglied en sy w*asf* tekste te worstel en die gepastheid van so ‘n studie vir die een-en-twintigste eeuse gemeenskap van Beaufort Wes. Die belangrikheid van menslike welstand is onvermybaar weens so ‘n welstand diep verweef is met menswaardigheid. Dit veg immers vir ‘n gesonde, God-bestemde lewe en samelewing. As mens is mensheid geskape om kognitiewe, fisiese, emosionele en geestelike behoeftes te beleef. Mensheid is geskape om te streef na intieme gemeenskap met God, die wêreld en die mede-mens.

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Introduction

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth – For your love is better than wine. Because of the fragrance of your ointments, Your name is ointment poured forth;
Therefore, the virgins love you.
Draw me away!
(Song of Songs 1: 2 – 4)

1.1 Background and Motivation

My decision to embark on the journey of an MTh gender and Health program is rooted deeply within my interests of the importance of reclaiming a healthy understanding of sexuality, particularly among the youth in the congregation where I serve. At the time of this study, I found myself situated in a small town called Beaufort West. A town riddled with various challenges, poverty, alcohol and tension regarding the definition of sexual morality and immorality.

I regularly found myself in conversation with teenagers as young as 12 and 13 who are sexually active with more than just one sexual partner. The phenomenon of young single mothers raising children without the support of a father figure, is also very common. Moreover, Beaufort West is also a small town where a number of its sub-communities willingly invites participants into their swinger's clubs. These manifold expressions of sexuality and morality led me to ask the following: what could be a healthy understanding of sexuality, morality and immorality? This study wishes to explore this question by using Body Theology as main conversational partner in a study on the Song of Songs whilst gathering a thorough understanding of human well-being.

The MTh Gender and Health program, funded by the Church of Sweden, served as a fertile space in which the intersection of Gender, Health and Theology may be explored. Throughout this program, all students were required to participate in a core module that introduces students to the most important ideas and theories regarding these topics. Throughout the core module my interests regarding Song of Songs,

morality, and Body Theology[1] were heightened as I found myself intrigued by the role of power, patriarchy, ideology, masculinity and the way this impacts human well-being. South Africa unknowingly succumbs to life-denying power structures shaped by patriarchy, traditions, culture, language and ideology which not only victimises the oppressed, but also victimises the oppressors themselves. (Moffet, 2006:142 & 143).

The role of human well-being[2], while unknowingly challenging the identified themes and their power structures, should not be ignored seeing that this well-being is deeply intertwined with human dignity and thus fights for a healthy, God-intended life and society.

Many "ordinary readers" turn with great expectation to a biblical book such as Song of Songs, striving for emotional reassurance whilst clinging to the hope that one day the world will embody the 'beautiful' love portrayed in Song of Songs. This form of understanding of the biblical book is unfortunately naïve as the book's compilation is set within a patriarchal, hierarchical male dominated society where women's sexual initiative was seen as a sign of rebellious behaviour (Carr, 2000:240). In general, the Song of Songs is popularly known as the intensely erotic love poem in the Bible[3]. To the "ordinary reader"[4] the poem portrays the importance of love, intimacy and the possibility that sex practiced within a love based relationship will hold no room for the possibility of disappointment. Yet in the midst of all of these wonderful and erotic

[1] Body Theology will be incorporated by a sub lens namely Sexual Theology. The relation between Sexual – and – Body Theology will enjoy further explanatory attention in the thesis as Sexual Theology forms part of the holistic lens of Body Theology. The relation between Sexual Theology and Body Theology is a state of progression as the undertaking of Sexual Theology and its two-directional inequity seeps into the undertaking to 'unmake', 'remake' and 'merrymake' Body Theology. Nelson equates Sexual Theology with Body Theology (Nelson, 1979:20). Terminology that will receive attention in Chapter 5.

[2] The notion of 'well-being' that is currently implemented stands in deep relation with the use of 'human flourishing'. The idea of flourishing as a human being has shrivelled to meaning no more than leading an experimentally satisfying life. The sources of satisfaction may vary: power, possessions, love, religion, sex, food, drugs – whatever. What matters most is not the source of satisfaction but the experience of it – my satisfaction. Our satisfied self is our best hope. A dark shadow of disappointment stubbornly follows our obsession with personal satisfaction, we are meant to live for something larger than our own satisfied selves. Petty hopes generate self-subverting, melancholy experience." (Volf, 2011:57 & 58)

[S] See Fiona Black (2000) *Beauty or the Beast? The Grotesque Body in the Song of Songs.*

[4] Gerald O. West (2007:2) refers to the "nonscholar" as the "ordinary reader" and strives to highlight the difference between each sectors (scholar and "ordinary reader") way of reading biblical texts. "This difference is significant and recognition of this difference can lead to creative and socially transformative collaboration between the different sets of interpretive resources these different sectors bring to collaborative reading project." (West, 2007:2)

elements of sex, I cannot help but wonder why for many humans, the greatest heartache and intense suffering is always interwoven with sex and sexuality[5]?

No individual is completely free from ideology and the misrepresentation it upholds to provide the very foundation it needs to upkeep its practical application (Blackbum, 2008:178). The Christian history is riddled with the entrenchment of patriarchy which according to Adrian Thatcher (1993:2) is an ideology that brings about a systematic social closure keeping woman from the public sphere by political, economic and legal arrangements standing in favour of men.

Carey Elles Walsh (2000:77) states that the contemporary individual shares a great amount with ancient individuals when dealing with desire and its intoxicating power in human lives. One cannot deny the shared furtive fascination regarding desire, between biblical and contemporary reader. The forms and means of humanly expression may have changed over the centuries, yet contemporary readers cannot deny that which has been shaped by history and thus cannot deny the importance of a Biblical document such as Song of Songs.[6]

Walsh (2000:77) does not fully conform to Boers'[7] definition of desire, but states clearly that desire is that which fuels the motives behind most of our human actions.

> A good part of our socialisation process involves our desires, which often get scripted by the media through onslaught of advertisements, movies, and cultural messages. What we see and hear over and over again in a culture becomes what we desire, yet in large measure, we never give our full consent to this external shaping of our desires.

The shaping of human desire should be viewed as both simple yet complex as there are various elements interplaying into the shaping our humanly desire. It is here that the unquestionable value of Song of Songs comes into play as the ancient text explores

[5] "Counselling women of all races and religions and classes brought home to me the truisms of sexual violence: rape, like most crimes is intra-communal (it is usually committed by 'insiders' than 'outsiders'); woman are far more likely than me to be raped; and women are invariably raped by men. In other words, sexual violence is an instrument of gender domination and is rarely driven by a racial agenda." (Moffet, 2006:134). In the end, we cannot deny that sexual and gender violence is the most brutal and intimate form of violence that human beings can succumb to.

[6] See Walsh (2000) and Landy (2011) regarding the importance of Song of Songs.

[7] See Boer (2000) *The Second Coming: Repetition and Insatiable Desire in the Song of Songs.*

desire, not because of some blind adherence to an established tradition of biblical authority but due to desire's complexity as a force in life (Walsh, 2000:88 & 89).

On the whole, the Song of Songs is of importance for the contemporary world as it explores desire, sexuality and gender in a way that is probing, investigative, experimenting and emphasising vulnerability. Such an understanding of Song of Songs leads to a morality that is not legalistic in nature but that is receptive to the contemporary world and its legislations.

My current position as a gender critical biblical student has provided me with the much-needed curiosity to attempt the exploration of authoritarian power that hampers well-being. The study will attempt an exploration of the historically upheld patriarchal ideology that shaped both the historical[8] and contemporary worlds' approach to sex, sexuality, gender and body theology as well as the factors that are in conversation with these identified themes. It is thus an attempt to explore in which ways a responsible understanding of a biblical book such as Song of Songs can serve as example of understanding matters such as sex, sexuality, gender and body theology with the hope of experiencing humanly well-being[9].

1.2 Problem Statement

Society exhibits a good amount of confusion regarding sexual norms. The reason for this is that history's views regarding sex, sexuality, gender, relationships and marriage is restricted by patriarchal thoughts (Thatcher, 1993:2). The context in which I found myself when writing this thesis, brought an interesting challenge to light regarding sex, sexuality and the embodiment thereof. While writing this thesis, I served as a pastor in the community of Beaufort West. I find myself in a context challenged by the disconnection between sex, desire, and the yearning for constructive elements found within the Song of Songs[10]. The disengagement between sex, desire and the yearning for constructive elements is met by the youth with a dominant silence as opposed to the older residents who eagerly voice their diverse sexuality. The addressing of these

[8] The Hebrew poem 'Song of Songs will be used as the conversational script throughout this study.
[9] The study of humanly well-being in discussion with the Song of Songs will serve as the much-needed open door for Pastoral Care to participate in the exploration of Song of Songs and identified themes.
[10] I am aware of the fact that the Song of Songs has both constructive and challenging elements hidden within its various poems. The constructive elements which are yearned for refers moral elements such as loyalty, safety, support, understanding, trust and human well-being.

yearnings will thus be approached by the embodiment of a responsible understand of human well-being and Song of Songs. The unfortunate reality is that the contemporary world lacks a proper understanding of an important component which lies deep within all the identified elements, namely sexuality and love free of fear.

1.3 Research Question

From this problem statement flows the following research question:

1.3.1 Main Question:

- In what way may reading the ancient Hebrew love poems found in the Song of Songs, read through the lens of Body Theology, contribute to shaping an informed, healthy understanding of desire and sexuality?

1.3.2 Sub-questions:

- How would one go about defining sex, sexuality and gender?
- What are the interpretive possibilities of reading the Song of Songs *wasf* texts through the lens of Body Theology in order to foster a healthy understanding of sex, sexuality and gender?
- In what ways are the themes of an Embodied self in Body Theology an appropriate understanding to offer an alternative understanding of our bodyselves[11] and its delights?
- What are the practical possibilities of bringing transformation to a patriarchal community such as Beaufort West through the thesis' collected work?

1.4 Research Focus

In order to address this research question, this thesis seeks to provide a clear understanding and application of Body Theology, sexuality and desire, which will function as the guiding lenses to explore the Song of Songs and its significance in a

[11] James Nelson's use of the term 'bodyselves' is based on his belief that the style of Christian belief is influenced by the way in which humans experience the self and others sexually (Nelson, 1978:15). Nelson applies this term as to denote the integration between the soul and the body as the body is not a separate object apart from the way in which a person experience's the self (Nelson, 1978:20). Nelson identifies humanity's lack of acknowledgement towards the profound extent of being a body as a 'false spiritualisation' (1978:20).

modern context. The centrality of Body Theology and sexuality in both theory and practice throughout the centuries should not be underestimated, and therefore this study wishes to illuminate something of the human's concern with her/his body and the struggle towards the fulfilment of one's destiny as being found in the wholeness of bodyselves.

This study proposes that by reading the Song of Songs through the lens of Body Theology, one may come to a healthy understanding of sex, sexuality, Body Theology and the implication thereof in our contemporary world. It is by embodying a responsible understanding of both Song of Songs and the identified themes that human well-being can be the outcome.

The study maintains that reading a book such as Song of Songs through the lens of Body Theology may help readers with the possibilities of a renewed, passionate and erotic understanding of love which is more than just mere sex. It is thus from within this context of a passionate understanding of love as an unshakeable seal[12] that the possibility of well-being sprouts into being which is an essential element of pastoral care. The importance of healthy marriages and relationships as intended by God[13], should never succumb to the short-sighted patriarchal understanding of love, sex and sexuality.

1.5 Research Objectives

In this study, I will in the first instance strive to understand Body Theology whilst constructing a hermeneutical framework for reading the Song of Songs. Secondly, this hermeneutical construction accompanied by the use of Body Theology will also be used during the exploration of three identified themes within the poetic structures of the *wasf* texts in the Song of Songs, inspired by the growing fascination of this short poetic book in the Bible, filled with various themes, an aesthetic beauty, a deftness of author and its hermeneutical readings throughout the ages.

Throughout the study the importance of understanding the above-mentioned themes (as highlighted in the sections above) within its own socio-historical context will be upheld and shape a great deal of the initial outcome of the study. The uncovering of

[10] Song of Songs 8: 6 – 7
[13] See Landy (2011) for a discussion on humanity created in the image of God, God's intended plan for His creation and sexual relations being centre to the Holy of Holies.

the socio-historical context of the text will also be assisted by the contemplation of the relationship between biblical and pastoral theology. Finally, this contemplation and wrestling with the manner in which the insights from this study may be used within a pastoral context (well-being) in order to help foster healthy individuals and healthy relationships, will also be deemed as a contributing theme.

The unmaking (deconstruction) of this historically fed patriarchy interlinked with the use of Body-and-Sexual Theology[14], will hopefully result in a responsible understanding of sexuality and sexual relationships in light of the divine love (Thatcher, 1993:3). It is within the unmaking of patriarchy and the embodiment of the struggles in Body-and-Sexual theology, that Christian's may hopefully gain insight into understanding sexual pleasure as a moral good, deeply rooted within the sacred values of our sensuality and erotic powers (Nelson, 1992:21). It is within this embodiment that individuals may gain respect for their own, as well as other's bodily integrity which will thus provide a defence against the common sexual violence and the violation of integrity (Nelson, 1992:21).

It is thus here in the embodiment of Body Theology, that the Song of Songs in the midst of all its complexities, eroticism and desire[15] can provide guidance as well as challenges to both its scholarly and "ordinary readers". Stuart and Thatcher (1997:227) argues that sexual experience (not just sex itself but everything involved), by the grace of God, provides a way to gain human well-being, as Godly love is deeply manifested in human love. The movements participating in human sexuality, moving from the own self to the other, is nothing else but the movement of Godly love caught up in creation. In the end, one cannot deny that bodily passion is more than a mere passion between two individuals in love (Stuart and Thatcher, 1997:227).

1.6 Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study will use Body Theology as a hermeneutical lens through which to read selected texts from the Song of Songs. In Chapter 4 of this study the work of James

[14] Nelson, J.B. (1992:21) defines Sexual Theology as the sexual experience with which humans' approach scripture, interpret traditions and attempt to live out the meaning of the gospel. It is thus a dialogical two-directional inequity.

[15] Desire through everything may be understood as the pursuit of fulfilment that forever falls short (Boer, 2000:276). Walsh (2000:3) states that the Song of Songs is without a doubt a depth charge into the nature of desire itself, one that all modern readers can learn from.

B. Nelson[16] and Lisa Isherwood & Elizabeth Stuart[17], offers a beautiful combination of both male and female voices guiding their readers to a thorough understanding of Body Theology that will form the basis for reading the Song of Songs.

The use of Body theology as the lens through which Song of Songs is to be approached stands in relationship with the use of Sexual Theology. Nelson (1992:22) writes the following on Sexual Theology and Sexuality that offers a corrective on the distorted views on sex and sexuality that will be the topic of Chapter 2 of this thesis:

> A viable sexual theology for our time will affirm that human sexuality is always much more than genital expression. Sexuality expresses the mystery of our creation as those who need to reach out for the physical and spiritual embrace of others. It expresses God's intention that we find our authentic humanness not in isolation but in relationship. It is who we are as bodyselves experiencing the emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual need for intimate communion with others, with the natural world, with God.

With reference to the exegesis of Song of Songs that will be the focus of Chapter 5, a literary theological methodological approach will be employed that pays attention to the social historic context of the Song in order to develop the focus on sex, sexuality, gender and Body Theology[18]. A thorough and realistic understanding of the ancient Israelites' interpretation of their historical world is of great importance to all readers who attempt a dialogical two-directional inequity with the Song of Songs. It is within the dialogical two-directional inequity that the contributing role of pastoral care comes into play, addressing cognitive and emotional elements in human life and well-being.

In summary, the study strives for a responsible understanding of the identified themes[19] within the Song of Songs whilst wrestling with the socio-historical context of the ancient Israelite society. A direct interaction with the text "as it is" from a contemporary understanding, will thus be implemented: the implementation of a dialogical two-directional inequity. This manner of use will thus offer a historical understanding of sex, sexuality, gender and Body Theology within the ancient Israelite

[16] James Nelson (1992) produces an insightful book *Body Theology* regarding the importance, relevance, and defining elements of Body Theology.
[17] Lisa Isherwood & Elizabeth Stuart (1998) produces a profound feministic voice within Body Theology throughout their book *Introducing Body Theology.*
[18] Desire is a prominent sub-theme to the use of Body Theology.
[19] Sex, sexuality, gender, and Body Theology

society. Walsh (2000:169) argues that the social historians of ancient Israel where able to reconstruct facets of Israelites' daily life such as livelihood, marital customs, rituals, dining habits, religious and legal beliefs, and the like. The contemporary individuals concern with cultural history also portrays our deep concern regarding the humanity of the biblical text as well regarding the similarity between the biblical characters and the contemporary world (Walsh, 2000:186).

1.7 Chapter Outline

This study will follow the following chapter outline:

Chapter 1, serves as the introduction to the study. The chapter will lay out of the study's background and motivation, problem statements, research objectives and methods. This chapter moreover will acount for the thesis' demarcation, methodology and contextual problems, with specific on the importance of Body Theology, sex, sexuality and gender.

Chapter 2, "Behind the Veil of Sex, Sexuality, and Gender", will unpack the problem of centuries of distorted understandings of sex, sexuality and gender. The chapter will thus focus on each theme's historical overview, after which the focus shifts to defining the theme and its relevancy to the modern individual. The chapter forms part of the lens through which the Song of Songs will be read.

Chapter 3, "Subverting the Sacredness of the Canticles" will explore the socio-historical world and genre of the Song of Songs accompanied by the exploration of the Songs' reception history and its contribution to the history of interpretation. This chapter will also produce a perspective onto the ancient Near Eastern Worlds understanding of sex and sexuality through the lens of Body Theology with the hope of identifying the value of reading The Song of Songs in a contemporary context with a focus on embodied desire.

Chapter 4, "An Embodied Self", will explore the theme of Body Theology. Shedding light on the development of Body Theology, the reality of dualism, bodily delights such as desire whilst serving as the hermeneutical framework that will be applied throughout the reading of the Song of Songs and its *wasf* poems in chapter 5. The importance of this chapter is not to be underestimated as it greatly contributes to the responsible

reading of the Song of Songs which in my mind will help the youth to develop a healthier understanding of sex, sexuality, gender and their bodyselves.

Chapter 5, "Body Theology and the Song's *Wasf* Poems", will focus on the use of the *wasf* poems[20] within the Song of Songs. The *wasf* is also known as 'a descriptive song', a poem that describes the male and female body by use of methapors or a series of images (Meyers, 2011: 142). Fiona C. Black identifies these *wasf* poems as two lovers who frequently refer to each other's bodies throughout the Song of Songs. Scholarly literature identifies the w*asf* poems as four concentrated descriptions of the body within the texts or poems, namely Chapters 4:1-5; 5: 10-16, 6: 4-7 and 7: 1-10 (Black, 2009:2). It will be shown how these most powerful metaphors are used to describe the true depth if love (Stadelmann, 1992: 208). The four *wasf* poems (Song 4: 1-5; 5: 10-16; 6: 4-7 and 7: 1-10) will serve as the focus of exploring various aspects of Body Theology and desire that may be helpful of cultivation an alternative understanding of desire, sex, sexuality and gender that may promote the accumalation of human well-being, serving as a central element of health.

Chapter 6, "Embodying Desire and Its Challenges", will serve as the concluding chapter of this study, reflecting on the significance of this study and contemplating further avenues for investigation in seeking to change the conversation on sexuality within our local congregations.

This thesis thus serves as a compilation of six chapters striving towards the understanding, application and study of Body Theology, sexuality and desire, functioning as the guiding lenses to explore the eccentric nature of the Song of Songs and its significance in a modern society. The centrality of Body Theology and sexuality in both theory and practice throughout the centuries should not be underestimated. Therefore, this study wishes to illuminate something of the human's concern with her/his body and the struggle towards the fulfilment of one's destiny as being found in the wholeness of *bodyselves.*

[20] "The term 'poem' is used to refer to a collection of images, usually the *wasfs.* 'Poem' is meant as a general description, is used interchangeably with 'text', and not the result of a technical analysis of poetic structure in terms of form, metre or the like, in the tradition of formal analysis that once characterised Song criticism. My decision as to where the boundaries of each description or poem lie is based on attention to theme and mood" (Walsh, 2009:2).

Chapter 2

Behind the Veil of Sex, Sexuality, and Gender

Tell me, O you whom I love, where you feed your flock, where you make it rest a noon. For why should I be as one who veils herself by the flocks of your companions?

(Song of Songs 1:7)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter serves as an unveiling of themes such as sex, sexuality, and gender. These themes have undergone dramatic growth, change, and misinterpretation in past centuries. As a young theologian who while writing this study was living in the small town of Beaufort West in the Karoo, find myself immersed in a context where residents constantly face challenges of poverty, alcohol, and sexual debauchery. Such individuals struggle to formulate and articulate their personal understandings of their own embodied selves, lacking knowledge of the difference between sex, sexuality, and gender. My community at that time essentially was a community struggling to articulate the relationship between God and the physical body.

I regularly found myself in conversation with adolescents[21] as young as 12 and 13 years who are sexually active with multiple partners. It has also been brought to my attention that the younger generations within specific communities in Beaufort West deem adolescent pregnancy (whilst still in school) as an aspiring social status. The phenomenon of young single mothers raising their children without a father figure is thus not an uncommon sight. It is with this in mind that this chapter wishes to explore the challenging themes of sex, sexuality, and gender through the lens of Body Theology.[22]

2.2 Interpretative Challenges

The discussion of the identified themes (sex, sexuality, and gender), viewed through the lens of Body Theology, finds itself nestled deep in the complex bosom of biblical

[21] Louw & Louw (2007:278) define adolescence as the transitional period between childhood and adulthood. See Louw & Louw (2007:278-347) for further information regarding adolescence, physical, cognitive, personality, and social development.
[22] See Chapter 4 for an indepth discussion of Body Theology.

text and traditions. Yet, when it comes to themes such a sex, sexuality, and gender in biblical traditions, there are some surprising contradictions accepted throughout the centuries. Knust (2011:5) views these contradictions as the Bible's failure to provide its readers with a consistent message regarding sexual morals and God's priorities. Knust's distrust of biblical texts is based on the reality that the Bible as a whole is riddled with complexities and contradictions as it shifts from the Old to the New Testament. Knust states that the Bible is filled with books which, at some point, contradict one another. Moreover, Knust (2009:11) argues that a modern perspective would regard various Old Testament practices as inhumane and abusive.

The distrust of biblical texts by scholars such as Knust should not be blindly accepted as its negative undertone can have an antagonistic effect on lay readers.[23] Readers are rather encouraged to apprehend that the reading of biblical texts is not without influence as "a reader is required before the Bible says anything, whether what is meant is what it means" (West, 2006:131). Once lay readers acknowledge their active participation in the process of interpretation, the interpretational focus shifts from biblical contradictions to the readers' theological contexts. This shift is made possible by biblical scholarship's focus on historical contexts, highlighting the fact that the Bible is a product of cultural, religious, political, social, and economic contexts of the ancient Near East (West, 2006:131-132).[24]

Dale B. Martin (2009:1-2) refers to the belief in textual agency, in which both biblical scholars and lay believers argue that the Bible "speaks" directly to them while they fulfil their "job" by "listening". The flaw in this approach is the fact that the biblical text itself does not exercise its own agency in times of interpretation (Martin, 2009:1; West, 2006:131). Martin (2009:2) supports this statement by writing that "human beings are necessary for meaning to take place, and we can experience no interpretation without human agency".

[23] West (2006*a*:132) writes that, while "biblical scholars might not have been interested in establishing lines of connection between the biblical contexts and the contemporary contexts, ordinary readers of the Bible are considerably interested in doing so".
[24] Chapter 3 provides further insight into this matter.

Debates regarding the biblical approach to sex, sexuality, and gender, has unmasked a variety of deceptive rhetorical practises by both scholars and lay believers.[25] Martin (2009:2) refers to one of these practises as "the sin of Christian foundationalism",[26] which blinds itself to the reality that the interpretation of the text is influenced by the interpreter's own social constraints.[27] Moreover, human beings constantly shape each other by way of interaction.

Martin and Knust's explorations of textual contradictions and the sin of Christian foundationalism need to be acknowledged and serve to enrich this chapter. One cannot deny the contradictory elements in the Bible, nor can one deny the responsibility that lies in the hands of the interpreter. The Bible should not be viewed as irrelevant in the lives of contemporary Christians, yet they are encouraged to find new ways of thinking about the manner in which they read and approach Scripture.[28] It is of importance to mention that there is no scientifically correct manner or method of reading Scripture, as the history of interpretation testifies of a broad spectrum of interpretational possibilities throughout centuries.[29]

The church's fundamentalist stance on celibacy, desire, marriage, sex, et cetera, has undergone a number of changes over the past two thousand years. Martin (2009:181) argues that accepting tradition as God's will for contemporary Christians, is to deliberately "close our eyes to the facts of history and wilfully believe a lie, which is dire sin in itself". Scholars and lay Christians should accept that historical criticism is not absolute. Martin (2009:185) goes so far as to write that no method of interpretation

[25] As long as interpreters believe that the text provides its own interpretation and meaning, all of the political and ethical responsibilities are projected onto the text rather than claimed by the interpreter (Martin, 2009:2).
[26] Foundationalism believes that the Bible should provide "a secure basis for doctrine and ethics" when interpreted with the appropriate method (Martin, 2009:3). By claiming full responsibility towards the text, the interpreter will be able to find a more secure basis for ethics and doctrine.
[27] Martin (2009:5) argues that "there are constraints on reading, but they are social psychological constraints, not constraints exercised directly by the 'text itself'".
[28] The reading of Scripture should not be held prisoner by traditional approaches as the "reading" of Scripture is filled with varied and unending options. The "enacting" of Scripture forms part of the "imaginative" ways in which "reading" can take place (Martin, 2009:165). Martin (2009:162) argues that Christians need to start applying a more sophisticated and adequate theology of Scripture as well as a fresh imagination.
[29] See West (2006:131-132) for further insight on this matter.

can provide readers with a firm foundation for correctly interpreting the Bible, yet, this should not discourage the interpretation of biblical texts.[30]

Moreover, the exclusive use of the Bible in the formulation of opinions on sex and themes such as marriage is a naïve, anachronistic, and a dangerous route to follow. According to Jensen (2010:21), this route will either lead to ignoring the hierarchical and patriarchal contexts "in which these texts arise" or lead to the perpetuation of these patterns. It is thus in light of these challenges that feminist theologians often read against Scripture, opting for a more liberating understanding of sex by making use of biblical books such as the Song of Songs. The Song reacts against traditional assumptions by "refusing to limit sexual desire to marriage" (Knust, 2009:48). It is by going against the grain that a biblical book such as the Song of Songs makes readers aware that there is no single answer to sex, sexuality, gender, and desire in the Bible.

2.3 It's all about Sex

As modern human beings we liberally speak of sex and sexuality, often breaking free from the traditional constraints and assumed biblical morality as can found in Genesis 2. Gazing back into history, it becomes clear that most forms of talk regarding sex and the body were tightly regulated by the power structures of state and church. However, strict regulations did not stop the masses from practising and thinking about sex beyond traditional structures (Weeks, 2010:1). In contemporary society, the masses have found their voice as mass democracy has started to speak about sex through the usage of documentaries, globalised media, television, films, social networks, and a broad spectrum of social relationships.

Throughout centuries, humans have strived to understand their own bodies, sexual desires, sexuality, and sex whilst leaving God out of the process. Hayward (1994:10) identifies this method as the "demystifying" of sex, which has shaped humanity's understandings of sexual feelings. Hayward is of the opinion that the same movements, politics, contingencies, and social concerns that shaped our history,

[30] Martin (2009:185) undertakes a more charismatic approach by writing that readers should be encouraged to accept the reality of a faith and Scripture riddled by challenges, whilst being challenged to have faith in the unknown. Martin argues that Christianity is not established on knowledge, science, history, or textual foundationalism, but rather on the revelation of Jesus Christ. Having faith in the unknown is living joyfully with the confidence that God will take care of His creation regardless of their faults, and living in the unknown and uncertain sphere of whether one's interpretation of the text is true.

culture, and value system still shapes modernity's moral and value system. The difference between the contemporary way of thinking about themes such as sex, sexuality, and gender, and that of the ancient world up until the end of the seventeenth century, is astounding. Thatcher (2011:6) writes that the "difference is so great that it takes a concerted effort to set aside what humans now take for granted regarding biological sex and gender" and what earlier generations understood these terms to be.

2.3.1 A Historical Overview

The ancient concept of sex and conception is undoubtedly complex as the ancient world (Romans, Greeks, Jews, and Christians) believed that only one sex existed, namely "man" (Thatcher, 2011:7).[31] The ancient world grew in its understanding of sex and conception, yet always arguing for a hotter and perfect sperm from the man and a cooler sperm from the orgasming woman.[32] Sexism ruled the ancient world, leaving women to be identified as the silent, inferior, and imperfect member.[33]

The ancient world's hierarchical perspective that the bodies of men were superior to that of women, provides answers as to the male favoured incarnation of God. Thatcher (2011:10) provides further insight into the hierarchical dilemma of the ancient world when writing that men, being both socially and biologically superior, were expected to exercise control over their bodies while women were perceived to live by their desires and unruly natures.

Lisa Sowle Cahill (1994:19) brings a shift in the understanding of the word 'sex' by emphasising the importance of sex, morality, and sexuality as it directly influences humanity's understanding of the self, God, other individuals, and even the material world. Cahill's work is not restricted to the biological constraints of sex, as her interest with sex stems from humanity's uncertainties in understanding sex and the confusion regarding which sexual behaviour is "morally praiseworthy" rather than disgraceful. The Christian church undoubtedly plays a central formative role in limiting the masses' interest in sex while thwarting their sexual imagination. Hayward (1994:13)

[31] The thought of two sexes, male and female is securely lodged in Western religion and culture, believing that the "two sexes are opposite". The ancient world believed that there was only one sex, male. The one-sex theory viewed women as inferior to men (Thatcher, 2010:7).
[32] See Thatcher (2011:8-11) for a more in-depth discussion of "hot men – cool women".
[33] Sexism is the assumption that one sex and its interests is higher that the sex and interests of another. This includes notions of one sex being more valuable, perfect, and representative (Thatcher, 2011:7).

emphasises the church's "antisexual preoccupation", marked by an obsessive and proscriptive attitude, which inhibits Western Christians from living their lives as sexual persons. The limitation of sex and the exploration of the sexual self has undoubtedly stripped sexual yearning of its joy, replacing it with anxieties regarding sexual morality.

2.3.2 Sex itself

Thatcher (2011:3) writes that adults undertake a certain sex due to a comprehensive process. Despite adults' identification of the traditional male and female sex, there are many who are unable to identify with either. Contemporary psychology has also broken free from traditional constraints and binary divisions, introducing various sexes, namely intersex, transsexual, or transgender, thus shedding light onto the complexity of sex.

Thomas Nagel (2002:125) is convinced that sex has something to teach all human beings, namely, that all humans possess a concept of sexual perversion which bears no relation with the reproduction process. The latter is undoubtedly a physiological process where sexual perversion is of psychological interest, since it is a concept only attributed to human beings and does not apply to lower animals,[34] let alone plants, whose reproductive functions are so easily tampered with.[35] It is also of interest to mention that all deviations from the "reproduction function of sex in humans", namely abortion, miscarriage, contraception, and sterility do not share in the identification of sexual perversion (2002:126).

Cahill (1994:20-21) affirms Nagel's explanation of sexual perversion by writing that human persons must have a duality in their sexual experience by being physical and urgent, as well as pervasive, in their reproduction function of sex. Cahill goes as far as to write that sexual experience "is also an avenue of affective and spiritual relations among persons, for good or ill" (1994:21). Yet, despite the duality in sexual experience,

[34] On a biological and physiological basis, human beings (higher animals) are similar to lower animals (Nagel, 2002:126). The appropriation of the word 'animality' to human beings should not be viewed as a pejorative term as it is only aptly applied to human beings, since human beings are animals of a special sort (Cahill, 1994:20).
[35] There is a number of fruit which, due to the work of science, produces no seeds. The mating between a horse and donkey also reproduces the sterile mule.

the human person in her-or-himself does not succumb to the complex duality, as human beings are to be viewed holistically.[36]

The duality of sexual experience accompanied by the unity of human beings deems to be a problem for human sexuality and the understanding thereof. Cahill (1994:21) writes the following on the understanding of sex and its challenges:

> It is this duality of experience in unity of being that grounds the problem of human sexuality. Sex in humans is not understood completely if it is explained only as a physiological species-survival mechanism, or a technique of physical enjoyment. It is also an instrument, or indeed a constituent, of the sorts of interpersonal relations that are most distinctively human. Since humans are capable of evil, wickedness, selfishness and manipulation in their relationships as they are of good, rectitude, self-sacrifice, and generosity, sex is a problem.

Cahill's reference to sex as a problem stands in relationship with humanity's detection of sinfulness in sex, most likely arising from the fact that humans can be cowardly and short-sighted. The short-sightedness that Cahill writes of is interwoven with the denial of what it means to be truly human, keeping humanity from dwelling in the beauty of sexual experience. Jeffrey Weeks (2010:2) argues along the same lines by asserting that sex is not intrinsically "naughty" but rather a focus point for powerful feelings. These powerful feelings arouse a sensitivity in the sexual discourse, creating a thin line between two contradictory points in life, namely tenderness and aggression, pleasure and pain, empathy and power (Weeks, 2010:2).

Scholars such as Thatcher (2011:4) initially seemed to strip sex of all positive perceptions, yearnings and pervasiveness by limiting it to the traditional division of a species, namely female or male. Thatcher's thwarting of sex is furthered by writing that, whatever else sex is, it deals with the ability to reproduce. It is this very basic biological division which serves as the foundation of social and cultural division of gender (Weeks, 2010:5). The basic biological division of male and female categorisation gives rise to a sex model namely sexual hierarchy. Weeks (2010:5) argues that the sexual hierarchy stretches downwards, starting with the traditional

[36] The discussion regarding duality and holistic human beings can be found in the introductory chapter, "Embodied Self".

thought of “natures endowed correctness of heterosexual genital intercourse”, to the so called “bizarre manifestations of ‘the perverse’”. As history and tradition holds, the perverseness is to be avoided – an avoidance encouraged by the hope that it would never come to light.

It is of interest to mention that contemporary society portrays a higher form of tolerance towards that which is different or perverse, re-evaluating relationships between heterosexual[37] and homosexual[38] individuals (Weeks, 2010:6). The growth in tolerance can be attributed to contemporary society’s reflection on the question “What is it to ‘have sex’?” Thatcher (2011:4) provides his readers with insight into a study done with students, in which they were asked what constitutes as having sex? This included asking whether oral and anal sex amounts to having sex. The collected answers clearly portrayed that the perception of “having sex” was identified as “having sexual intercourse”, most likely expressing a long-held Christian influence and wording.[39] The study also showed a percentage of students who identified a wide range of behaviours and activities involving physical intimacy which should not be accounted as “having sex”, thus broadening the playfield of understanding sexual activities (Thatcher, 2011:15).

In conclusion, it is clear that humanity is thinking, processing about important thresholds in shared intimacies and the way(s) in which sex is practiced (Thatcher, 2011:15). Thatcher argues that sex ought not to be limited to just procreation, as bringing a child into the world is in a defining class of its own. This chapter will thus share in Thatcher’s argument that “it is probably better left to people themselves whether they think their shared erotic activities constitute having sex or not”, as different traditions, societies, and cultures bring various approaches to the fore.

[37] Heterosexual relationships refer to intimate and romantic relationships between men and women, members of the biologically opposite sex. Weeks (2010:4) provides an additional identification for heterosexuality by referring to it as “natural sex”, taking pace between members of the “opposite sex”.
[38] Homosexuality is the terminology applied to individuals who find themselves in a same sex relationship, for example a relationship between two men or two women. “’Sex’ between people of the ‘same sex’ is therefore, by definition, ‘unnatural’” (Weeks, 2010:4).
[39] Moreover, this point of view argues that the purpose of sex is the possibility of conception (Thatcher, 2011:15).

2.4 Identifying Sexuality

Sexuality, a term originating from the medical profession, came to life in the 1860s as part of humanity's struggle to articulate its understanding of sex and sexual preference (Thatcher, 2011:5). The former section mentions the importance of acknowledging various cultures' and societies' personal understandings of sex, erotica, and identifications of acceptability, arguing that not everyone portrays the same obsessive concern with sex as the Western world.

2.4.1 A Historical Overview

The Western world, including the ancient Greco-Roman context, is largely preoccupied with who people have sex with – often more than with sex itself. The Greco-Romans were weary of passive sexual activities, and the people who practised them, for "effeminacy" were ostracised. The Greeks did not frown on homosexuality in a moral sense. Instead, they were weary of the fact that men would become "effeminate" in the process (Weeks, 2010:32).[40]

The development of the dominant Western model of sexuality is led by a long and complicated history, shifting from sex for pure pleasure, to sex outside of marriage being viewed as sin. "The twelfth and thirteenth centuries' overcoming of intense religious struggles produced arranged marriages for the good of families, resulting in couples never being alone while the shadow of the confessors loomed over their sexual lives" (Flandrin, 1985:115). Married couples' privacy was inexistent as theologians and canonists discussed their sex lives down to the last detail, hoping to provide detailed answers to "practical moral questions" regarding sex (Weeks, 2010:33).

The final and most drastic shift appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where the ancient idea that women and men "constituted but one sex", shifted towards

[40] The term "effeminate" refers to a man not living up to the standards of masculinity. "They are what real men are not, and real men are what 'effeminate' men are not" (Williams, 2010:137). Ancient Roman texts defined "effeminate" as men who sought to fulfil the receptive roles in times of penetration. This form of behaviour displayed partiality towards the sexual role defined as "feminine", as the individual portrays the willingness to abrogate their masculinity, and therefore the verb *mulierare* ("to womanise") was deemed appropriate (2010:157). Crawford et al. (1999:181) emphasise the ancient world's obsession with masculinity, by writing that, in order to define the masculine self, men felt the need to express their sexuality as directly opposite to the female gentleness, submissiveness, and so-called passiveness.

recognising the modern notions of two complementary genders (Weeks, 2010:33).[41] This shift also brought a decisive growth in new sexual identities, moving homosexuality from the basket of sin, to a psychosocial disposition. Weeks adds that the shift also introduced sexology as a new science of desire while speculations on the law of sexuality and sex emerged.

The twentieth century provided a profusion of new sexual identities, such as transsexual, bisexual, transvestite, the sado-masochist, and so forth (Weeks, 2010:35). Weeks argues that the increase in sexual identities has provided humans with the prospects of defining themselves by defining their sexuality. Weeks (2010:35) applies Foucault's deconstruction of sexuality by arguing for sexuality's separation into two junctures of two major points of concern, namely, society[42] and human subjectivity[43], identifying the body and its potentialities as the bridge between the two.

The growth in societies have awakened a great concern and curiosity concerning the lives of its members, focusing on economic well-being, moral uniformity, hygiene, health, and national security. The positive outcome of society's concern has unfortunately also resulted in the negativity of obsession with the sex lives of others, giving rise to moral anxieties and other factors. It is this obsession that has driven sexuality to becoming an important moral, political, and social issue (Weeks, 2010:36).

2.4.2 The Fragility of Sexuality

It is thus realistic to say that sexuality is a product of historical and social forces rather than a natural phenomenon. Weeks (2010:7) cautiously defines sexuality as a "fictional unity", created by the human mind, that at a time never existed, and in future may cease to exist. Throughout his caution, Weeks argues against its identification as a natural phenomenon, defining it as a historical and social construction, connecting to it a host of various cultural forms, mental, and biological possibilities (Weeks, 2010:7).[44] Stephen Heath (1982:7) dethrones sexuality by stating that it does not truly

[41] This will be discussed in the succeeding section.
[42] Society focuses on the well-being, health, future growth, and prosperity of the whole population (Weeks, 2010:35).
[43] Weeks (2010:35) shares in Foucault's definition of human subjectivity by defining it as who and what humans truly are.
[44] Weeks (2010:7-8) argues that the mental and biological possibilities are nothing else but bodily differences, gender identity, needs, reproductive capacities, erotic practices, values, desires, institutions, and fantasies.

exist in society and is thus of no importance. Weeks (2010:7) serves as a challenger of Heath's statement as he argues for sexuality's existence as "a palpable social presence, shaping our personal and public lives".

Simon (2003:ix) shares in Weeks' argument regarding the interwoven nature of social and cultural structures with human sexuality by arguing that no human being can ever just "do sexuality" as it is socially maintained, organised, and transformed. The constant change in culture also brings change in the sexuality of the human beings. Ruth Westheimer (2005:122) supports Simon's opinion by writing that, throughout the course of growing up, children have undoubtedly observed other- and same-sex adults' behaviour in ways that either confirm or disconfirm traditional gender-role expectations and sexualities. Children's observations of other individuals' deeds serve as learning tools in the centre of social learning theory. In this way, the behaviour of others gradually becomes the model from which humans learn and shape themselves.

The study of sexuality and its history also highlights the abuse of power within the sexual realm.[45] By reading through the history of sexuality, it becomes evident whether people have (or have not yet) embodied humanity's capacities for "mutually empowering relationships" (Nelson & Longfellow, 1994:10). Instability in human relationships is an undeniable reality as the misuse and even abuse of power within relationships are evident. There is a clear connection in the manner in which humans treat each other and the way in which they themselves are treated. For example, a high number of abusive adults used to be abused children, influencing the way in which they treat others, especially in moments of vulnerability.

Yet, despite all arguments regarding the shaping and defining of sexuality, Nelson and Longfellow (1994:3) ask an important question, namely: "What does our human sexuality mean?" Thatcher (1993:2) provides an answer by writing the following:

> Human sexuality is about how men and women respond to themselves as sexual beings, and how sexually they relate to each other. Sexuality is the mode or manner by which humans' experience and express both the

[45] The understanding of sexuality from a historical perspective cannot be freed from sexism, patriarchy (the oppression of women), and androcentrism (Nelson & Longfellow, 1994:14).

> incompleteness of their individualities as well as their relatedness to each other as male and female.[46]

Human sexuality can thus not be reduced to the physical and procreative pleasures of sex, for it is an integral part of humanity's holistic being (Nelson & Longfellow, 1994:4). Simon (2003:ix) writes that sexuality is never just sex, but rather an "inconstant universal". This argument implies that all discourses of sexuality are inherently about other matters which exceed the realm of sexuality. The need for explanation lies in the fact that sexuality is the ultimate dependant variable, never providing a constant thread for the unification of human experience.

The role of human experience in the understanding of sexuality should not be underestimated, as sexuality serves as the manner by which humans express and experience their relatedness to each other, as well as their flawed individualities (Kosnik et al., 1999:547). Despite humanity's flawed sexuality, there lurks a divine calling for human well-being[47] as human beings *are* their bodies.[48] Kosnik et al. (1999:548) is of the opinion that "our fleshly reality fashions our perception of everything", influencing every aspect of humanity.

> Sexuality further serves as the development of genuine personhood by calling people to a clearer recognition of their relational nature, of their absolute need to reach out and embrace others to achieve personal fulfilment. Sexuality is the Creator's ingenious way of calling people constantly out of themselves into relationship with others (Kosnik et al., 1999:550).

This encouragement of creativity in the proses of finding the authentic self and establishing relationships with others, moves beyond traditional expressions of

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[46] Thatcher applies exclusive language by restricting his definition to heterosexual relationships. However, the usage of inclusive language would serve more fitting.

[47] This well-being stands in deep relation with the concept of human flourishing. The idea of flourishing as a human being has often been reduced to mean no more than leading an experimentally satisfying life. "The sources of satisfaction may vary: power, possessions, love, religion, sex, food, drugs – whatever. What matters most is not the source of satisfaction but the experience of it – my satisfaction. Our satisfied self is our best hope. A dark shadow of disappointment stubbornly follows our obsession with personal satisfaction, we are meant to live for something larger than our own satisfied selves. Petty hopes generate self-subverting, melancholy experience" (Volf, 2011:57-58).

[48] Kosnik et al. (1999:548) are of opinion that "all levels are touched by our embodied presence in the world. The body's way of knowing and tending is there before we reflect upon it." Humanity cannot deny the body's wisdom as it is embedded the nature of their being.

procreation, while deconstructing "destructive sexuality".[49] Relationships with other humans and God thus serve as vital elements in humanity's discovery of their true sexuality (Thatcher, 2011:4). Karen Lebacqz (1999:131) argues that by reaching true unity in relationships with others, accompanied by the embodiment of vulnerability,[50] humanity will grasp the ultimate purpose of sexuality. Lebacqz (1999:132) identifies vulnerability as a God-given purpose of sexuality, as it holds the potential of unbuttoning an in-depth understanding of sexual ethics and human sexuality.

Throughout this section it has become clear that not all scholars are in unity regarding "what sexuality is", differing on its relevancy and origin. Therefore, Thatcher's (2011:4) advice to his readers not to worry too much about defining sexuality, but rather to focus on its usage within a certain context, will also be recommended in this study, as sexuality can evoke debates burdened by tension.

2.5 Gender Construction

The former sub-sections shed light on the ancient world's perspectives of the male and female body, describing the male body as "hotter" while the female body was seen as "cool" and passive.

2.5.1 A Historical Overview

For over 2,500 years, the understanding of the male and female body was gathered from apparent biological facts, directed at apparent moral facts regarding female and male relations. Thatcher (2011:17) argues that, although various facts can be collected from the general physical strength and size of the male body, it is deemed as insufficient to ground "alleged *moral* facts" regarding the inferiority of the female body based on the description of it being cooler and passive. Francis Crannny (2003:2-3) agrees with Thatcher's arguments regarding the patriarchal and hierarchal reality within gender, referring to a binary division within gender, which privileges the masculine, as is found in Western societies. It is the upkeep of such patriarchal views and misogynistic mindsets which drove feminism to the point of addressing the gender inequality.

[49] Kosnik et al. (1999:550) define "destructive sexuality" as the result of interpersonal alienation and personal frustration.
[50] The theme of vulnerability will undergo further discussion in Chapter 4.

Gender in itself is a complicated subject to address as it has various facets to take into consideration. Moreover, humanity has been conditioned in such ways that the presumption of someone else's gender is almost an automatic reflex. The gender concept came into existence during the early 1970s as an analytical category with the hope of distinguishing between biological sex and the manner in which it shapes behaviours assigned to either femininity or masculinity (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004:56).

2.5.2 The Gender Reality

Ruth Westheimer (2005:121) defines gender as a biological construction, including both chromosomal and genetical aspects, hormonal mechanism of genital development, "normal and abnormal sex differentiation", as well as the relationship between gender stereotyped behaviours, sexual inclinations, and sex hormones.[51] The psychological construction of gender incorporates the development of sex roles along with the exploration of the meaning of femininity, androgyny,[52] and masculinity. It also strives to understand the various influences in the shaping of gender, as well as important gender differences and similarities.

Thatcher (2011:17) describes gender as a verb as it is something to be done and undone rather than a conceptual noun that needs to be grasped.[53] There is undoubtedly a biological difference between men and women. However, problems arise when people give way to assumptions regarding the actual worth of another human's dignity and value, whilst exercising power and control (Thatcher, 2011:18).[54] Judith Butler (2004:2) comments on this:

> The terms by which we are recognised as humans are socially articulated and changeable. And sometimes the very terms that confer "humanness" on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the

[51] Westheimer (2005:122) defines hormones as a "chemical substance secreted by an endocrine gland into the bloodstream, where it travels to other organs or glands and charges their activity in some way, such as increasing or decreasing that activity".
[52] According to Westheimer (2005:122), the concept of androgyny denotes a compatible mixture of male and female psychological traits in the same individual. Killerman (2014:4) defines androgyny as a gender expression filled with elements of both femininity and masculinity.
[53] The term "gendered" is applied when "something is actively engaged in social processes that produce and reproduce distinctions between women and men". The term 'gendered' can also be accompanied by the term 'gendering' as both describe the assumptions and production of gender as well as the institutions which it shapes (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004:59).
[54] See Tolbert, (2000:99-101) for further in-depth information regarding the unequal social powers within gender through the ages.

> possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human.

Religion serves as a prominent counterpart in the exercise of such power and control within gender. Religion can also often be described as the "essentialist" voice in gender, where more secular discussions provide a "constructionist" voice (Thatcher, 2011:19).

2.5.3 Gender Essentialism and Constructionism

The concept of essentialism is not really welcomed by postmodern scholars, as it focusses on the essence of gender, regarding it as fixed, fundamental, and eternal (Thatcher, 2011:19). Essentialism in theological discussions of gender, serves as the doctrine which states that God created humanity with only two sexes (male and female). This way of thinking argues that these two sexes are part of the God-given nature of humanity, are unalterable, and that same-sex relationships are unnatural as humanity was only created to desire the opposite sex (Thatcher, 2011:20).

Gender constructionism, contrary to gender essentialism, breaks free from the fundamental mindset, by arguing that everything is constructed. It is within constructionism that women and men relate in complex and different ways, relative to their various cultural and social contexts and conditions (Thatcher, 2011:20). Constructionism is therefore the name given to theories that suppose that gender relations are neither created by nature nor revealed by God, but rather historical constructions produced by societies and social groups.

A basic theological approach to these opposing positions necessitates the belief that humans are a species of created beings. Entitled as created by God, humans have the freedom of reproducing by themselves, thus implying that the dominant percentage of humans will be powerfully drawn to members of the opposite sex (a person with whom reproduction is possible). It is at this point where the theme of desire comes into play. Despite being God's creation, it is not essential for all human beings to reproduce, to find intimacy with anyone at all, or to experience sexual fulfilment through intimacy with the other sex. Therefore, desire breaks free from implied gender constraints.

Westheimer argues that “gender role typing is the developmental learning process of how we come to think of ourselves as a member of one sex or the other” (Westheimer, 2005:122). He continues that the gender-role conflict is understood as any feeling of restriction that accompanies desire to behave in a manner that does not conform to traditional gender stereotypes. Traditionally, women and men have slipped their feet into differently shaped shoes, they wear different clothes, buy their clothes from different shops, and use separate public restrooms. These traditions have become so familiar that society has only recently started to challenge them.

2.5.4 Gender Identity

Gender identity deals with the way people think about themselves, interpreting the chemistry or hormone levels that compose a human person. Gender identity thus deals with “who you think you are” (Killerman 2014:3). Killerman argues that humans first form their identities around the age of three, after which they become incredibly difficult to change. The formation of gender identity is powerfully influenced by environmental facets, hormones, as well as biological sex. It is thus of interest to mention that the gender assigned at birth does not always align with the individuals gender identity.

There is a major shift in the theorising of gender identity in interdisciplinary gender studies as scholars such as Butler (1990:25) argue that there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, but that it is performatively constituted by various expressions.

2.5.5 Gender Expression and Performance

Gender expression refers to the way in which an individual exhibits their gender through their manner of dressing, behaviour, action, and interaction with others – both intentional an unintentional. Gender expression is thus ever changing, conforming to, or breaking free from traditional ways (Killerman, 2014:4-5). As social theorist and constructionist, Butler (1990:140) is of opinion that gender should not be understood as something essential, innate, or natural, but rather as something performed. Killerman (2014:4-5) refers to such performance as “gender expression”. The idea of performing gender stems from the argument that certain things we say will perform certain functions, just by being articulated (Thatcher, 2011:21). Human beings become

the women and men who they are through the repetition of daily gendered acts. Humans thus 'perform' their genders through their actions.

Gender performance in itself is not free from social constraints as individuals perform in certain manners and conform to social structures without even questioning their actions. Yet, when individuals become aware of their actions, they are set free to self-consciously modify, repudiate, and affirm their own actions (Butler, 2004:1). Power, patriarchy, and performance are not the only important facets within gender, but language is also fundamental to most human activities. The language we inherent is never natural nor neutral as it is filled with underlying assumptions. Thatcher (2011:25) provides his readers with five harmful examples of the power of naming,[55] revealing a "discourse of violence, of objectification, of otherness, of contempt, casual disposal and heterosexual male camaraderie". This form of language expresses a hierarchical attitude that reduces people to things while reinforcing the ancient prejudice of the active male and passive female.

2.5.6 Gender and its Power

Power as a key concept of gender (as well as sexuality) is filled with common, yet contradictory meanings, but for the sake of this study, only three discernible types of power will be discussed. These are the level of power in the relations between women and men, the power discourse in the interaction between individuals and social institutions, and "the transformative level where relations of power can become relations of mutuality" (Thatcher, 2011:26)

The first point of discussion touches on the role of power in history and society (as discussed throughout this chapter), indicating that power is causual, in the sense that its exercise sets things into motion which those affected by it may not willingly choose. When this happens, power becomes nothing else but "power-over" another, at times even requiring violence or the threat of violence to maintain it (Thatcher, 2011:26).

The second point of discussion focuses on the interaction between individuals and social institutions which has thoroughly been discussed throughout this chapter. It has been argued that institutions such as the church and state have controlled the

[55] See Thatcher (2011:24-25).

population by means of ideology, discourse, and disciplines such as medicine, theology, sexuality, and morality throughout centuries.

“The third point of discussion according to Thatcher (2011: 26) on the transformative level where relations of power can become relations of mutuality.”. When looking at the work of Michael Foucault regarding power, one cannot avoid Foucault’s question regarding the manner in which power shapes humanity’s thought patterns. Yet the question remains of how one can resist power when the tools needed are themselves a product of power (Thatcher, 2011:28). Thatcher opposes Foucault’s pervasive account of power by adding a positive element to power itself, arguing that it can be disempowering to view transformations, outcomes, and choices as predetermined by the previous struggles of power. The transformation of power thus becomes a reality when the relations of power is replaced with the relations of mutuality. The “power-over” others must thus become “power-with” others if gender relations are to be shaped into relations of mutuality.

2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to remember that throughout the discussions of sex, sexuality, and gender, this study has indirectly discussed three different fields, shifting from biology (sex), to psychology (sexuality), to sociology (gender). Despite the fact that the three fields appear separate, they are dependent upon one another. Throughout this Chapter it has become clear that the three fields do belong together, building on each other whilst shaping humanity’s understanding of the self and giving way to its obsessive fixation with sexual desire.

In some sense, this chapter sheds light on contemporary individuals’ lack or even broken understanding of sex, sexuality, gender and its power. A broken understanding of these themes is undoubtedly a dangerous path to tread on as it directly infiltrates individuals’ personal, worldly and spiritual relationship. The following chapter will this serve as the foundation of the rest of this thesis, whilst embarking on an exegetical journey of the Song of Songs. Thus, this study hopes to assist the readers in identifying the value of the Song of Songs in a twenty-first century community such as Beaufort West.

Chapter 3

Discovering the Sacredness of the Canticles

My beloved has gone to his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed his flock in the gardens, and to gather lilies, I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine. He feeds his flock among the lilies.

(Song of Songs 6:2–3)

3.1. Introduction

Chapter 3 serves as a basis for the rest of this thesis, embarking on an exegetical journey to explore the various methods available to explore biblical texts such as the Song of Songs. The exegetical journey will discuss the socio-historical context of the Song of Songs, its interpretation history and readers, canonical context, dating, authorship, literary dimensions, and theology. These explorations will form the basis for introducing the lens of Body Theology in the next chapter, with the hope of identifying the value of reading the Song of Songs in a contemporary context in terms of a focus on embodied desire.

Adrian Thatcher (2011:50) argues that a theological approach of the Song of Songs holds the possibility of serving more as a scene or position within religious traditions, inspiring joy, commitment and tenderness, filling the reader with the wonder for the human capacity for love. The Song of Songs, viewed through Thatcher's lens, is a book praised for its celebration of sexual love, exquisite desire and its forbearing challenge regarding God's absence and His yearning for humanity (Thatcher, 2011:50). Scholars such as Thatcher (2011:69) writes that the Song provides a fierce praise of passionate human love, which has often been underplayed against the interpretation of an expression of the passionate longing between God and the individual soul.[56]

[56] Thatcher (2011:69) argues that the Song originally expressed praise about the delight of physical human love. "Instead they came to praise the denial of physical love. Allegory came to replace metaphor, that is, the material, physical, human content of the songs came to represent something else. It had to have a superior abstract, spiritual meaning." Thatcher's work thus argues that the explicit sexual metaphors has instead become allegories for a purely spiritual love, while the meanings of the poems have become reversed and "de-materialised".

By viewing God as the creator of the body and all its delights, it relocates God within the realm of senses, causing sexuality to become a natural image for divinity at work, whilst lessening the element of shame latched onto sexuality. Sex can thus be viewed as potentially rich in meaning, since the divine is constantly present in it while holding great sacramental worth (Thatcher, 2011:73).

Scholars such as Thatcher (2011:73), Cheryl Exum (2005: 1) and Carey Ellen Walsh (2000:xi) view the Song as a prime example of sexual desire not just being bound to humans but also to God: God desiring humanity, humanity desiring God, and one another. The Song thus serves as an intriguing lyrical poem[57] of erotic love and exquisite desire, a compilation of songs,[58] providing modern readers with a glimpse of desire's nature as even the ancient Israelites experienced it (Walsh, 2000:xi). Fiona C. Black (2009:1) identifies the Song as poetry with much to reflect upon, as it portrays the behaviour of lovers, whilst simultaneously affecting its readers. The Song of Songs can thus be viewed as a book filled with perplexing and vibrant imagery, especially body imagery, often portraying the body in provocative ways (2009:2).[59] Also Cheryl Exum (2005:1) maintains that the Song is a poem in which the body serves as both the object of desire as well as a source of delight. The love poem thus introduces its readers to an exploration of love's nature while relying on the characters dialogues to teach its readers about love as seen through the eyes of the lover.

Finally, Francis Landy focuses on the role of poetry which clearly shows that poetry recreates various forms of experience – guaranteeing love, both ideally and historically, even waging against the threatening behaviour of death. He writes as follow: "For the Song of Songs, however, all is vanity, except love: for only love is as strong as death, and gives life to the world" (Landy, 2011:4). In a nutshell, Landy

[57] Scholars very often find themselves in debate regarding the identification of Song of Songs as a book or poem. This debate will be an ongoing one, since readers and their interpretations are diverse. "To understand the Song of Songs, the question of whether the book is a collection of separate poems or a cohesive composition with significant continuity between the poems must first be determined" (Assis, 2009:9).

[58] Temper Longman III (2001:1-2) argues that the structure of the Song is a loose unity, as indicated by an occasional refrain and a unity of personae. He thus argues that the poems are ultimately independent of one another, yet can be read as a unity. Assis (2009:9) does not share Longman's view of the poem's composition, and brings to the table the possibility of cohesive composition with significant continuity between the poems. This matter will receive further attention throughout this chapter as it has a direct impact on the interpretation and identification of the poem.

[59] The subject of the poem, according to Black (2009:2), is identifiable as body imagery, lingering within the Song which so pleasingly teases its readers.

(2011:4) argues that poetry is inseparable from love, as love sprouts from communion. The Song expresses itself through language, implementing it as the vehicle of communication, making words as adequate as gestures, touch, and feelings. The Song of Songs arguably shares in this communion of love, as it is part of the love experience, whilst making it accessible to the reader (Landy, 2011:4).

The achievement of the Song's communion with love, desire, and sexuality, can only be achieved by the reader and their interpretation. This subject will receive further attention in the following section.

3.2. Song of Songs and its Readers

The notion of the Song creating a sense of accessibility is of note as it is through the readers that the poet's vision of love lives on. It is the reader who brings the lovers to life by 'overhearing' them, and it is by observation that the reader experiences the characters' love unfold, and so participates in the joy of the lovers (Exum, 2005:7).

> For readers, however, a certain element of voyeurism is involved in being privy to the intimate exchanges of lovers. Presenting the lovers as aware of and in conversation with an audience is a poetic strategy that makes the relationship between the lovers less private, less closed (and the Song less voyeuristic), and thus facilitates the reader's entry into the lover's seemingly private world of erotic intimacy (Exum, 2005:7).

The invitation to the reader can be viewed as a poetic strategy, presenting the reader with the choice of accepting or rejecting the poet and poem's open invitation. This very invitation, present throughout centuries, has proven to be quite effective in the seduction of its readers by applying its poetic vision of desire (Exum, 2005:8).

3.2.1. History of Interpretation

Attempting to trace a history of debate regarding the interpretation of the Song is not just an interesting process, but is also useful in the Song's genre identification. The identification and choice of genre relation will conclusively determine the directionality of this study's textual interpretation and is therefore of high importance. It would be impossible to gather an exhaustive knowledge of the history of interpretation, as it would be beyond the scope of this study. However, the study at hand aims to explore

some interpretive trajectories, with the hope of discovering a suitable genre, aiding in the interpretation and appropriation of the Song.

Throughout the ages, both Christian and Jewish interpreters have delighted in the so-called profligate imagery within the poem. Unfortunately, interpreters have often` reverted to the use of allegory to account for the Song's[60] explicit nature. Bergant (2001:8) argues that the dispute regarding the Song's canonicity, prompted by the various interpretive options, suggests a literal reading as the original form of interpretation

> Though initially disputed, there was eventual agreement about the sacred character of the Song of Songs; it was its meaning that remained enigmatic. Several interpretations have been advanced, each one clearly dependent upon the literary classification to which the book is assigned (Bergant, 2001:8).

Bergant (2001:8) believes that the interpretations can be classified according to four basic categories, namely "a dramatic performance; as an allegory; as a cultic re-enactment; and as a collection of love poems". The application of the four basic categories reveals distinctive facets of the Song while presenting corresponding possibilities for the understanding of the poem. Bergant also mentions that the earliest Jewish readers applied a very literal approach/interpretation to the Song, while others used it as a drinking song. However, the reading of the Song of Songs through an allegorical lens[61] became the dominant form of interpretation. (Bergant, 2001:8-9)

It is important to mention that scholars have only the scantiest and most indirect evidence of the earliest interpretation(s) of the Song, implying a great unknown until about the first century A.D. on how people read the Song (Longman, 2001:22). It is here where the dating[62] of the Song becomes important, as it identifies the original

[60] As referred to in an earlier argument.
[61] The use of the allegorical lens reflects various aspects of the covenantal relationship between God and the Church, and YHWH and Israel.
The covenantal relationship between God and the Church is the interpretational result of Christian allegory. "The Christian allegory was either ecclesiological, describing the relationship between Christ and the Church, topological, with moral implications, or Mariological, seeing the Virgin Mary as the preeminent type of the Church" (Bergant, 2001:9).
The covenantal relationship between YHWH and Israel is the interpretational result of Jewish allegory. "The Jewish approach was a kind of historical allegory, recounting Israel's story from the experience of the Exodus to the advent of the Messiah" (Bergant, 2001:9).
[62] The date of the Song will enjoy further attention in the section 'Literary Analysis of the Song of Songs'.

audience, aiding the reader in the interpretation of the text. Longman (2001:23) provides an important statement regarding some of the oldest translations and interpretations of the Song:

> It is often pointed out that the Septuagint of the Song shows no sign of allegorising the text. Unfortunately, we do not know when to date the translation of this book precisely. Furthermore, it may be just a good literal translation of the text that avoided embedding any interpretation into it. In other words, the translator may have understood the book allegorically, but he simply represented the surface meaning of the Hebrew text into Greek.

3.2.2. Allegorical Interpretations

The strategy of allegorical interpretation has dominated the reading of the Song of Songs for centuries. When the history of allegorical strategies of interpretation is considered, it becomes clear that the later interpretations (Christian interpretations) speculatively took their cues from the former (Jewish interpretation), leading to various understandings in different theological schools. Othmar Keel (1994:6) objects to the allegorical approach to the text:

> How then did allegorical interpretations arise that see, for example, Yahweh in the radiant male lover and Israel in his female counterpart? Certainly not because the Song was originally meant as allegory.

The application of allegorical interpretations to the Song of Songs deserves further attention as it is. Here it is important to mention that there exists an acute distinction between an "allegorical piece of literature and an allegorical interpretive strategy" (Longman, 2001:23)[63]. According to Longman (2001:23), the allegorical piece of literature is nothing else but an intentional piece of writing, implying that an author intended the readers to take the surface meaning of the text as symbolic of another level of meaning.[64] The Hebrew Bible contains numerous allegories,[65] yet from Longman's definition, it is clear that the Song holds no possibility of being allegorical.

[63] The application of allegory as a strategy of interpretation begun with Greek mythology. See Longman (2001:24) for the extended tale of Greek mythology and allegory as a strategy of interpretation.
[64] Longman (2001:23) presents the following example and definition of the identification of an "allegorical interpretive strategy": "In the words of *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics,* 'We have allegory when the events of a narrative obviously and continuously refer to another simultaneous structure of events or ideas, whether historical events, moral or philosophical ideas, or natural phenomena.'"
[65] See Longman (2001:23) for examples of allegories in the Hebrew Bible.

The poem in itself has no allegorical elements within its composition – it has simply fallen victim to allegorical interpretation. Keel (1994:7) also provides a complementary definition of 'allegory' and the use thereof:

> Allegorising begins when new circumstances and new ways of thinking can no longer come to grips with an old and honoured text. Because of its status the text cannot simply be discarded (just as Greek-speaking Alexandria, e.g. could not discard Homer's Iliad.), but its contents can no longer be accepted as they are. Thus one claims to have discovered a deeper meaning in the text – a meaning that is only there because one has first inserted it.

Keel shares some insight regarding the application of allegorical interpretation of the Song by referring to the final loss of Israelite independence at the end of the Hasmonean dynasty, and the beginning of the Roman rule in 63 B.C. The resulting intensification of the separation of national life from religious life, led to emotions riddled by offenses and unending questions.

> Once understood as national- religious literature, the canon was seen more and more as cultic-religious literature, the natural interpretation became more and more offensive to groups rigorously and monomaniacally fixed only on the question of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel (Keel, 1994:7).

The sad reality of the allegorical search for deeper meaning is that is has resulted in theology that is arbitrary, unsatisfactory, and often revoltingly grotesque, as portrayed by the Song's history of interpretation. (Keel, 1994:7).

Dianne Bergant (2002:9) supports Longman and Keel's definition of the Song's "allegorical interpretive strategy", when referring to a time as early as Origen (240 C.E.), when Christians began to read the book with devotional eyes, viewing the relationship within the Song as a spiritual marriage between God and the individual soul. A comparable "allegorical interpretive strategy", as identified by Longman, is also found in the work of Jewish writers such as Philo of Alexandria and Maimonides.

However, in the advent of critical scholarship, the application of allegorical (and typological) interpretations, has now given way to the application of more literal

readings (Bergant, 2002:9).[66] Bergant (2002:10) promptly writes that critical scholarship has brought readers back to a literal reading of the Song, thus regarding the poem as a collection of love poetry filled with straightforward eroticism. Moreover, the relationship between the explicit sexuality of the Song, as well as the absence of God's presence and moral teaching(s), most likely contributed to the application of early allegorical interpretations.

It is thus of interest to mention that spiritual interpretations[67] of the Song most often includes some form of allegory or typology. The irony of allegorical and typological exegesis is, that while searching for spiritual interpretations; it may impose unintended meanings which do not contribute a better understanding of the Song (Keel, 1994:8). In order to evaluate the allegorical and typological interpretation of the Song, a brief survey will be done of the Jewish and Christian allegories derived from the text. This survey will share in a similar layout as that of Longman (2001) in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*

3.2.2.1. Jewish Allegorical Interpretation

The Jewish allegorical interpretation of the Song and its characters originated from the idea that the man in the Song is God, and the woman is Israel. This allegorical interpretation attempted to turn away from a 'shallow' reading of the Song, viewing it as the sensual love between a man and a woman. Rather, it vowed to plunge the interpreter into a 'deeper' meaning, reflecting God's love for Israel. (Longman, 2001:24). Keel (1994:7) refers to early Jewish groups like the Pharisaic scribes, and Essenes as some of the earliest allegorical interpreters of the Song. These allegorical interpretations speculatively date back, at the latest, to the second half of the first century B.C.[68] However, it is important to mention that information regarding such early Jewish interpretations is limited (and always somewhat hypothetical).

The rise of various allegorical interpretations of the Song portrays something of the human hunger for spiritual or deep knowledge within religious individuals. This hunger

[66] Dianne Bergant (2002:9) writes the following regarding the definition of allegory and typology: "When allegory is employed, the nature imagery and exchange between the lovers are read as double entendre, saying one thing but meaning another. In a typological approach, the book is read literally as an account of human love, but this love is seen as a type of love that God has for humankind."
[67] A Theological interpretation of the text.
[68] It is of interest to mention that the first allegorical interpretations came not from the Rabbi Aqqiba at the beginning of the second half of the first centry A.D., but rather the Parisaic scribes (Keel, 1994:7).

is clearly seen within the religious traditions of Jewish mysticism and philosophy[69]. With this in mind, it would be helpful to look deeper into Christian allegorical Interpretation(s) of the text.

3.2.2.2. Christian Allegorical Interpretation

Keel (1994:8) illustrates the manner in which Jewish interpretations influenced the Christian exegesis of the Song:

> When the Christian church received the Song from the Pharisaic scribes, who were dominant after the destruction of Jerusalem, the book came with a thoroughly established allegorical sense. Yet Origen (185–253/54 A.D.) who, along with Hyppolytus of Rome, was the first teachers of the church to take up the Song, still saw it clearly as a work of profane poetry (Keel, 1994:8).

Keel's research regarding Origen and the Song reveals Origen's view of the Song as mere superficial babble, unworthy of God, which drove him to embracing typological interpretation of the text (Keel, 1994:8). Origen's personal struggle with the literal meaning of the Song is visible in his discouragement in the reading of the Song, due to its enticement of physical love. The demonising of the Song, its eroticism, and the arousal of physical needs, was further emphasised by scholars and theologians such as Cyril of Jerusalem, who wrote the following regarding the natural understanding of the Song: "For you must not, accepting the vulgar, superficial interpretation of the words, suppose that the Canticle is an expression of carnal, sexual love" (Peebles, 1970:215).

The twelfth century produced various writings by anonymous rabbis, whilst inspiring poets and novelists. Later in the fifteenth and sixteenth the academic climate gave rise to the Reformation and formation of humanism, yet even these new movements did not challenge the dominating interpretation of allegory and typology (Keel, 1994:10). Alternative methods in interpreting the Song only made their appearance in the upcoming of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The eighteenth century brought

[69] Research openly portrays that many Jewish sages were of mind that the Song portrayed a union between God and the individual soul. The most dominant amount of evidence is collected from the medieval period, particularly among those rabbis who followed the work of Maimonides (Longman, 2002:26). Early Christianity, as early as Origen (c. 240 C.E.), closely followed the Jewish interpretation of the Song (Longman, 2002: 26).

numerous representatives of the literal and natural interpretation of the Song to the fore (Keel, 1994:10).

The nineteenth century brought further freedom from the allegorical or typological interpretation to the fore. Moreover, the embodied liberation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gained momentum as it emphasised the significance of ethos, and historical interpretation, with its focus on aspects such as the archaeology of the ancient Near East (Longman, 2001:37). These methods produced the exploration of large architectural structures, whilst finding hundreds and even thousands of written documents. These discoveries have made it increasingly difficult to maintain the allegorical fashion of reading, resulting in the increased usage of literal and natural interpretation(s).[70] Moreover, literal and natural interpretations have paved the way to a new viewing and appreciation of the body in religious circles. The struggle with the relationship between the body and the soul is an on-going battle while its impact on the reading of the Song cannot be ignored. This on-going struggle will be addressed throughout the study; however, the historical world of the Song of Songs will first be unpacked.

3.3. The Historical World of the Song of Songs

The Song of Songs, as also the rest of the biblical scriptures found within the canon, did not appear in a literal and cultural vacuum, but is polemically and integrally related to its society. The vision of love and the portrayal of desire within the Song dominantly makes use of the rich cultural heritage of Mesopotamian and Egyptian love poetry (Exum, 2005:47). Longman (2001:49) argues that the dominant amount of evidence is collected from Egypt, supported by love poetry and literature from Mesopotamia, Northwest Semitic, early Arabia, and India. Evidence unveils the strong similarities between the Song's genre, themes, motifs, language, poetic techniques, and the various cultural influences mentioned above (Longman, 2001:4).

It is of note to mention that the context of the ancient Near East will only be unpacked in a brief manner, since anything more will move beyond the scope of this study. The

[70] The literal or natural interpretation of the Song most definitely resists the idea that the Song is a code riddled with something different than the words imply (Longman, 2001:38). "It is necessary, though, to point out immediately that literal does not mean a flat or plain interpretation. A natural reading affirms the presence of rich poetry with all the ambiguity and mystery inherent in that poetry" (Longman, 2001:38).

translation and interpretation of ancient Near Eastern love poems is a complexity within itself, resulting in various interpretational debates (Exum, 2005:48). The on-going debates regarding the translation and interpretation of these love poems, calls for the consideration and evaluation of the manner in which these ancient poems shared common ground with the Song of Songs (Exum, 2005:48)[71]. The relationship between the Song of Songs and the ancient Near Eastern countries, as mentioned in the former paragraphs, is identified by the shared general topic of human love and sexuality, similar forms,[72] images, and analogous epithets (Longman, 2001:54)[73].

It is thus important to remember that these poems stem from diverse cultures, nestled within different attitudes toward love, relationships, and different sexes. While the Song of Songs is said to be similar to such poems, it also differs in significant ways. Francis Landy (2011:11) highlights this important element when he warns against the enthusiastic comparison of the Song and ancient Near Eastern love poems, due to the problematic elements within interpretation and translation of the poems. There is thus a high risk that any, or possibly all comparisons can be based on false criteria. Therefore, any comparison of the Song to literature and poetry of other contexts will be done with great care and humility. The discussion of various contexts, with the hope of responsibly understanding the comparison between the Song of Songs and ancient Near Eastern countries, will include Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Ugarit (Kirtu). References to other relevant ancient literature will also be made.

3.3.1. Egypt

According to Longman (2001:50), Egyptian love poetry stems from the Ramesside period (1305–150 B.C.) and was mainly found in four literary works, namely, the Bhester Beatty Papyrus I, Papyrus Harris 500, the Turin Papyrus, and the Cairo Love Songs. The probable purpose of these songs was entertainment, most probably at banquets. There is no indication whether they served as cultic or ritual purpose. Exum

[71] This comment sprouts out of Cheryl Exum's (2005:48) work, who illustrates how these ancient poets worked with common materials to celebrate love from different angles.
[72] Temper Longman III (2001:54) also refers to these "similar forms" as "descriptive poems".
[73] Longman (2001:54) writes that "the ancient parallels to the Song from Egypt, Mesopotamia, Ugarit, and India demonstrates that the language of love crosses national and linguistic boundaries. We are not suggesting any kind of direct borrowing of songs between these cultures, but there was likely an awareness of love songs from other countries, at least among the elite, similar to the awareness of wise sayings from abroad."

(2005:63) affirms this by asserting that Egyptian songs had nothing to do with worship and were not about gods.

It is of interest to mention that Egyptian and Mesopotamian love poetry deals with a much wider spectrum of situations and emotions, also offering a more multifaceted vison of love than the Song of Songs. According to Longman (2001:63), one of the reasons for the difference between the Song and Egyptian and Mesopotamian love poetry, is that the Song functions as a single poem with its own personal and distinctive vision of love. Egyptian and Mesopotamian love poetry does not produce such a personal vision of love, but rather contains a variety of love poems. (Longman, 2001:63):

> In the love lyrics of Egypt and Mesopotamia, in addition to desirous and besotted lovers, mutual delight, sexual pleasure, and devotion, one encounters, among other topics, jealous lovers, vindictive lovers, unfaithfulness and its punishment, petulant lovers and simple infatuation are found.

In spite of obvious differences, when considering ancient Near Eastern literature, Egyptian love songs could be classified as having the closest resemblance to biblical material in both language and mentality (Keel, 1994:4).[74] It is thus plausible that Egyptian love songs with all its history, influence, and relation with biblical language and mentality, most likely had some form of influence on the Song of Songs. However, it is impossible for scholars to identify one specific context or culture as the sole influence on the Song. Therefore, the ancient Near East is often used as an umbrella term to refer to possible influences on the text.

[74] According to Keel (1994:4), in Israel it was also the government officials, or better known as the "wise" and their students who composed, and in some cases even gathered, wrote down, and circulated the love songs. Their educational presence explains the rich, learned, and differentiated language of the Song. Moreover, their privileged status explains the familiarity with every kind of luxury which is so apparent among the Song's authors. Keel also argues that the "wise" and their students' self-assurance stems from the freedom the writer had in expressing their experiences and feelings.
Exum (2005:63) also writes that the Song provides very sophisticated artistic composition, with a rich vocabulary, and is versed in the poetic traditions of the ancient Near East. This information also suggests that the poet/author moved in educated and elite circles in Ancient Israel. Moreover, the poet and other ancient Near Eastern poets, could have found inspiration in popular love songs, just as numerous composers have used popular melodies as themes for symphonies and other sophisticated musical compositions (Exum, 2005:63-64).

3.3.2. Mesopotamia

When referring to Mesopotamian love poetry, it is important to note that both Sumerian and Akkadian literature is included under this heading (Longman, 2001:52). Since the Akkadians produced less love poetry than the Sumerians, the Sumerian influence on the Song of Songs is greater than that of Akkadians. Most Mesopotamian love poetry is shaped by the dialogical elements by which the lovers are usually identified. Within the dialogical element, readers will find the lovers interacting and addressing a host of various characters (Exum, 2005:51). Moreover, Mesopotamian love poetry has a narrator, who greatly influences the poem's dynamics, serving as an informant of the poem's status.[75] According to Exum, the Mesopotamian corpus as a whole could best be described as a narrative, or dramatic poetry, rather than lyrical poetry.

> The action, especially when accompanied by a narrator who reports events in sequence, progresses in a linear fashion. This is quite unlike the lyric poetry of the Song, where the movement is circular (Exum, 2005:51).

It is also within Mesopotamian love poetry where one finds the female voice to be the dominant voice. This female voice expresses desire and demands gratification, leaving the man's voice as an imagined response to the woman's petition (Exum, 2005:53). The so-called sexually explicit nature of the Song of Songs, is mild compared to the sexually explicit trends of the Mesopotamian love poetry. The sexually explicit nature in both the Song of Songs and the ancient Near Eastern love poetry, is flamed by the usage of conjuring, addressing the element of absence within all love poetry.[76] Exum (2005:54-55) comments on the use of conjuring in ancient Near Eastern love poetry:

> Metaphoric descriptions that conjure up the lovers are a shared feature of ancient Near Eastern love poetry. Nissinen (1998:612) draws attention to the function of such descriptions in Mesopotamian texts as magical or rather mystical in nature: The reality is not only described, it is simultaneously created by comparing the deity with observable objects and, in this way, making the presence of the deity, or the beloved, real in a mystical sense.

[75] Love poetry, which was once used as part of a ritual or performance, was given the status of immediacy. See Exum (2005:51) for further explanation.
[76] "Conjuring seeks to make immanent through language what is absent, to construct the lovers as 'real' (that is, present before us) and endow them with meaning" (Exum, 2005:6-7).

Exum (2005:56) concludes, with much certainty, that the metaphoric descriptions of the body in the Song of Songs are more elaborate and even bolder than Mesopotamian or Egyptian love poetry. The Song portrays a distinctive feature through its use if metaphoric descriptions serving as a poetic strategy for resisting closure. This manner of doing conjures up the lovers, only to let them disappear and be conjured up once more. (Exum, 2005:57)

3.3.3. Ugaritic (Kirtu)

The Ugaritic love poetry, better known as Northwest Semitic Literature, holds minimal equivalence to the Song. In fact, the only resemblance between the two is some Hebrew elements found in Northwest Semitic poetry (Exum, 2005:53). Longman (2001:50) and Exum (2005:53) agrees that there are some snippets of the Song that show similarity to individual poems. A relevant example is the Ugaritic Kirta epic, in which Kirta describes the woman that he desires for his wife, and the city of Udum, which he needs to besiege (Exum, 2005:53). However, Exum concludes that, “in spite of this and similar love poems in the Ugaritic epics, we will find little that is really illuminating of the Song in Northwest Semitic”. (Exum, 2005:53)

3.3.4. Other Ancient Literature

Beyond Egyptian and Mesopotamian love poetry, scholars have also traced some similarities between the Song and so-called pre-Islamic Arabian odes, which were written two centuries before the rise of Islam (Exum, 2005:53). These Arabian odes are relevant as they preserve ancient Semitic poetic conventions. It is important to mention that, even though there are similarities to be found, there is still much doubt about the relationship between the Song and the odes. Exum (20015:54) rightly argues that these odes are not truly relevant to the Song, seeing that Egyptian love poetry provides a closer parallel than any other ancient literature.

According to Exum (2005:54), parallels between the Song of Songs and the songs from Egypt, Mesopotamia, Ugarit, and other ancient literature, demonstrates that the language of love crosses both national and linguistic boundaries. Exum does not opt for a theory in which the direct borrowing of songs between the identified cultures has taken place, but emphasises an awareness of love songs from other countries, at least among the Hebrew elite. The identified similarities between the Song and the

mentioned love poems include the use of the same general topic(s) regarding human love, sexuality, desire, and similar forms and analogous epithets and images.

Desire provides both positive and negative elements as it contains both bliss and danger. The two-edged element of desire, as found in the Song of Songs, should not be frowned upon as it offers its readers profound wisdom (Walsh, 2000:xi). When scholars ignore the intensely sexual tone within in the Song, they mute some of the Song's wisdom, resulting in unhelpful and confusing hermeneutics (Walsh, 2000:xiii).[77] Scholars, as well as the "ordinary readers"[78] of the Song, have no other choice but to wrestle with the Song's information regarding the ancient world's wants and needs and the relevance thereof for Biblical readers, especially when exploring love and desire within such a poem.

3.4. The Song of Songs in Canonical Context

Carrey Walsh (2000:2) starts a section of her book *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs*, by asking the readers: "What is a book of erotica (that is, descriptions of sexual yearning between two lovers) doing in the Bible anyway? And how are we to cope – in embarrassed silence or in glee, essentially mimicking the very pleasure described in the Song?"

In totality, the Song does more than just enact a desire. Rather, it lays bare desire's impact on the individual and probes its constant complexities as a force in life (Walsh, 2000:3). Asking what the Song of Songs is doing in the Bible is therefore both a historical and spiritual question. These two questions wrestle with the Bible as a whole, as well as its relevance for readers today. The issue of canonicity places a heavier emphasis on *how* the Songs came to be included in the Bible, than *why* it was included (Walsh, 2000:188).

As mentioned in the former sections, the interpretational and historical aspects of the Song of Songs play a great role in humanising the sublime Song. The interpretational history of the Song has provided readers with the much-needed glasses to, as much as possible and without prejudice, view the Song's canonisation process and inclusion

[77] Carrey Ells Walsh (200:xiii) makes use of theories of sex, gender, and desire as tools to understand themes within the Song of Songs.
[78] Gerald O. West (2007:2) refers to the "nonscholar" as the "ordinary reader" and strives to highlight the difference between each sector (scholar and layperson) and its unique way of reading biblical texts.

in the ‘holy writings’. The identification of the Song as holy is responsible for much controversy, as many Jewish and Christian interpreters have argued that the sensuality of the Song seems out of character considering the rest of the holy writings within the Bible (Pope, 1999:367). Rabbi Aqiba expressed his disdain for such arguments:

> Heaven forbid that any man in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs renders the hands unclean (i.e. holy), for the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, and the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies (cf. Exum, 2005:70-71).

Despite queries concerning the canonicity of the Song, it has firmly held its place within the Bible throughout the centuries, constantly surprising Jewish and Christian readers. Therefore, the question regarding Song’s canonisation has no substantial answer. Moreover, the starting point for scholars is firstly questioning other texts and their considered “sacredness” (Exum, 2005:70). It is thus important to mention that the questioning of the canonicity of the Song, raised at the rabbinic Synod of Jamnia around the year 90 A.D., was not filled with controversy as to whether it was to be reckoned amongst the inspired books, but rather discussing the validity of its acceptance into the canon. Luis Stadelmann (1992:5) writes that, in addition, the allegorical interpretation bears a great witness to the canonicity of the poem. Garrett (1993:367) affirms this by stating that “certainly no one would dream of interpreting the Song of Songs as an allegory of God and Israel if it were not found in the Bible”.

However, it is important to note that various other biblical texts emphasise the uniqueness and importance of the vertical relationship between a woman, man, and God. Therefore, to regard the Song of Songs as unworthy of canonisation unless read allegorically, would be foolish. By ascribing the Song’s canonisation to nothing more than allegorising or historical drama, is to deny the crucial importance of cherishing and understanding vertical relationships in life (Garrett, 1993:367). As Garrett (1993:368) writes “It also reflects a failure to appreciate the place of wisdom literature as a guide to healthy and happy behaviour in this world”.

The Song of Songs may lack much of what was identifiably “biblical” about the other writings already collected in the canon as it contains in itself unique elements and themes such as sexual language, fantasies of coupling, and descriptions of bodily

arousal (Walsh, 2000:96). The metaphors of desire continually excite and provoke response from readers, who then must remind themselves that all this fevered lust is really about God and us (Walsh, 2000:101).

The real reason for the Song's first placement within the canon is unknown, yet scholars have argued that Christians simply followed the Jewish acceptance of the poem. The process of its inclusion into the Jewish canon also remains a mystery, however, there are those who argue that the poem's textual relation with Solomon aided its canonisation (Longman, 2001:58). However, Longman (2001:57) argues that other Solomonic writings, such as the Wisdom of Solomon failed to make it into the mainstream canon, concluding that it is far more likely that the allergisation of the Song was a result of the poem's inclusion in the canon rather than serving as its reason for canonisation.

Moreover, Landy (2005:5) suggests that, instead of poetry being the imperfect vehicle for what lies beyond words, lovers' bodies become the vehicles of poetry and music. The love song is thus the spiritual exemplar of love. It is for this reason that Walsh (2000:5) therefore urges for a wider perspective in terms of our preference of, and reaction to, biblical material. This widening of perspectives will hopefully create more space for wonder, humility, repulsion, shock and allow us to break free from a canonical obsession, whilst viewing a challenging book such as the Song of Songs (Walsh, 2000:190):

> For whatever else the Bible is – a disparate collection of ancient Israel- it is foremost a book chock-full of religious and theological content. The Song, then, presumably has spiritual content, enough to qualify as holy to the rabbis determining its canonical appropriateness.

The identification of the Song's spiritual content, qualified as holy due to its canonical position, aiding the application of the Song in the life of the reader. The debate regarding the canonisation of the Song should not dominate the reader's interpretation, but rather magnify the intriguing beauty and complexities of love, desire, and sexuality in the Song (and the Bible).

3.5. Dating the Song

Opinions and theories regarding the compositional date of the Song are numerous, yet quite diverse. Although the text-itself provides no reference to a date, scholars thus speculate, on the basis of linguistic and historical criteria, that the Song was composed around 500 B.C. (Stadelmann, 1992:2). However, this speculation is not conclusive as scholarly theories differ too widely.

According to Stadelmann (1992:4), the Song's linguistic elements are characteristic of the Hebrew language of the post-exilic period. Thus, Stadelmann (1992:4) proposes that "so as to fix with more precision the date of composition of the book we situate its themes in the historical context relating them with those treated in other biblical books". Observations regarding the language, as well as the authorship of the Song, have conclusively led various scholars to an agnostic standpoint on the issue of the date" (Longman, 2001:19).

The title of the Song seems to indicate Solomonic authorship, or a dedication "to king Solomon". According to Garrett (1993:348), there are scholars who speculate that this identification rather implies something along the lines of "in the style of Solomon," yet there is no clear indication that the Hebrew word *lamed* can be interpreted as meaning "in [the] style of". The use of the possessive *lamed* as a term for authorship is speculated to be correct, yet the reference to Solomon most likely refers to the adopted translation, implying that the Song was composed by a court musician in the Solomonic period (Garrett, 1993:348). Pope (1977:22) supports this argument, by referring to Tur-Sinai's work, in which the Song is ascribed to the Solomonic period.[79]

Garrett (1993:350), who laments that scholars rarely explore the similarity between Egyptian love poetry of 1300–1100 B.C. and the Song of Songs, argues that common literary motifs and formal elements serve as an indication that the author was most likely familiar with Egyptian poetry, and lived when the motifs common to both collections were appreciated and current. The Song is thus most reasonably

[79] Garrett (1993:352) refers to the fact that the atmosphere of wealth and luxury in the Song concurs best with the Solomonic period. "Of course, one can argue that these are only similes and that they do not prove that the writer actually lived in an age when such things were common. It is doubtful, however, that a poet would use imagery, described in such vivid detail, that was outside his own frame of reference. When a poet does venture to use a metaphor that is beyond his personal experience, that metaphor is apt to be of a general nature and ridden with cliché. Certainly, this is not the case in Song of Songs" (Garrett, 1993:352).

interpreted as being classified in the same genre as Egyptian love poetry, which would not be in contradiction to the argument made for the Solomonic era, as Solomon would have possessed sufficient knowledge of Egyptian literature as needed to compose such a love song.[80] Further attempts to date the book on the basis of grammar and vocabulary are inherently weak due to scholars' limited knowledge of the history of the Hebrew language (Garrett, 1993:349-350).

Landy (2005:1) argues that the Song's inhabited world portrays something that is characteristic of later work, thus involving the option of a more educated writer. Moreover, he (2005:21) argues the following regarding the inquiring of biblical tradition with the hope of placing the Song on the cultural map:

> In seeking to put the Song on the cultural map, we should inquire as much within the biblical tradition as to parallels in other languages, particularly since the cultural map does not exist.

Garrett (1993:348) mentions that there are some scholars who, on the basis of some Greek and Persian loan words, assign a later date to the book. References to the Aramaic influence and certain Hebrew forms support the alleged late date of the Song. However, Landy (2005:22) concludes that he is personally convinced of a date in the fourth century B.C., as the Song uses a stock of poetic conventions from the fourth century, "not only in technique but also in phraseology".

3.6. Authorship

The former section addressed the possibility of Solomonic authorship by referring to the superscription in Song of Songs 1:1, functioning similarly to a title page, thus introducing the work that follows (Longman, 2001:2). According to tradition, readers often assume the Song to be written by Solomon. The main reason for this belief is the reference to Solomonic authorship of the Song in the Midrash Rabbah[81].

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[80] "Curiously, however, some scholars are willing to sacrifice the obvious implication of Egyptian influence on the Song rather than concede its logical implication, that the Song was written in the united monarchy period" (Garrett, 1993:351). Garrett concludes that the presupposition of a late date overrules all evidence of literary dependence, despite all parallels between the Song and Egyptian love poetry.

[81] The Midrash Rabbah refers to three main contributions of Solomon, namely, the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs, all of them originating from one of three phases in Solomon's life (Longman, 2001:). "Furthermore, those who believe that the Song was authored by Solomon, suggest that the popular title for the book, Song of Solomon, implicitly identifies Solomon as the author" (Longman,

Despite Solomon's three main contributions (Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and Proverbs) in the Midrash Rabbah, there are more than enough significant reasons to question the speculated Solomonic authorship. Longman (2001:7) provides four prominent reasons as to why this is the case. Firstly, arguing that language does not serve as a reliable indicator of both the date and author. Secondly, he questions Solomon's essential role within the Song due to Solomon's dubious reputation when it comes to love. Thirdly, Longman uses Solomon's minimal role[82] in the text as a reason for doubting his authorship, since a mere three passages clearly states Solomon as the object of the poem (and not the composer). Lastly, Longman (2001: 7) refers to the repeated featuring of Solomon's name in other subscriptions such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Bergant (2001:8) provides a valid statement by writing that the inconsistencies in the book itself clearly challenges scholarly claims of single authorship by throwing the accuracy of interpretation based on any strict, literary patterns, be it well-structured drama, allegory or cultic re-enactment, into question. This very argument opens up the possibility of a female poet, since the poem is dominated by a woman's voice (Longman, 2001:7).

3.6.1. A Female Poet?

Longman (2001:7) refers to a school of thought which suggests that a female poet was responsible for the Song of Songs. This argument rests upon the dominant female voice in the poem, recurring sixty-one times out of a total of one hundred and seven verses. It is of importance to mention that it is not just female scholars who argue for female authorship (Longman, 2001:7). LaCoque (2008:41) argues for a female poet who resisted social norms, including the idea of women only being receivers, yet never initiators, of love (cf. Longman, 2001:8). However, it is of importance to note that the quantity of female voice in the Song does not necessarily argue the case of female authorship, as men do have the talent of imitating the female voice to a certain extent.[83] Moreover, aspects such as unity, social-historical context, and literary style

2001:3). It is of importance to mention that, even in the modern period, this perspective has found defenders as a number of scholars turn to the similarities between the Song and Egyptian love poetry.

[82] The three passages refer to Solomon's three different life phases. Longman (2001:6) provides his readers with a full discussion of the passages and the impact thereof.

[83] Longman (2001:8) also turns to Brenner, who argues for a female author on the basis of Song "1:2-6; 3:1-4; 5:1-7; 5:10-16", as these verses are essentially so feminine that a male author could hardly successfully imitate the female texture and tone.

have further implications for the gendering of authorship (Longman, 2001:7). In this regard, Exum (2000:24), in her essay *Ten Things Every Feminist Should Know About the Song of Songs,* writes that feminist critics are virtually unanimous in their appraisal of the Song's non-sexism, gender equality, and gynocentrism.[84] However, Exum's fourth point of discussion, "the woman, or women, in this text may be the creations of male authors," makes the argument that the women of the Song, then and now, might well be "the creation of an androcentric narrator," just like other female characters in biblical narratives. Longman (2001:8), incorporating the work of Clines (1995: 6), who affirms this by arguing that the Song was written by men in order to meet the need "of a male public for erotic literature".[85]

In conclusion, Longman (2001:9) asserts that the discussion of the author's gender reveals more about the readers as commentators than about the Song itself. Such a discussion would rely on a theory of gender and literature, believing that men and women are typecasts in the way they write. Longman identifies the ironic fact that both sides of the argument does not stem from social conservatives, yet certainly feeds the agendas of such a conservative argument. Longman (2001:9) thus concludes that the most honest assumption is the scholarly uncertainty regarding the author's gender. The Song remains a collection of love poetry, whether it is written by men or women, or even both. Walsh (2000:151) affirms this by asserting that the focus on authorship, dating, and literary analysis, cannot take away from the greater relevancy of the Song of Songs:

> The Song provides at points some detail on location and identity, but only noncommittally. Its real interest lies in mining the mysteries of desire itself. Detail, plot, even clarity, all otherwise salient features in a text, are burdens here, shirked in the trade-off for feeling desire, a bargain brave and well worth it.

It is thus clear that the identification of the Song's authorship, dating or canonical context (forming part of the literary analysis) should not engulf the readers approach, experience and outcome of the Song of Songs as the Song's interest lies in the

[84] Exum (2005) also provides her readers with a number of scholarly perspectives on the gender equality factor in the Song.
[85] The dominant element of 'gazing' also serves as a resisting factor to female authorship, yet both Black and Exum provide a double-edged argument regarding the role of 'gazing' in the Song.

exploration of life's most mysterious elements. Scholars who do tend focus on the Song's literary analysis with the hope of determining the author's intended meaning whilst infiltrating the readers interpretation of the text, seems to shape the outcome of the Song's mysterious elements.

3.7. Literary Analysis of the Song of Songs

A Literary analysis can be defined as the practice of looking closely at small sections of texts with the hope of identifying the manner in which they affect the text as a whole. Scholars argue that the study of the literary analysis focuses on the manner in which the plot/structure, characters, settings, dating, authorship and a number of other techniques are used by the author to create meaning within a text. A literary analysis of the Song of Songs will thus include an exploration of the text's unity and structure, its plot, and genre, with the hope of acquiring better insight into the Song and the reader's interpretation of the various texts viewed through the lens of Body Theology.

3.7.1. Unity and Structure of the Book

The literary composition of the Song can be described as a homogeneous work of poetry, structured into eight poems. According to Garrett (1993:374), the structuring into eight poems should not be oversimplified, as the Song does not necessarily provide structured poetry as often assumed or preferred by scholars. The question of unity, or "literary integrity" (Pope, 1977:40), is in reality less crucial than it seems. Scholars therefore consider the Song to be a collection of diverse works, whilst having a certain generic coherence (Landy, 2005:29). Pope (1977:40) argues that the conventional division into eight (unevenly long) sections is speculatively based on some vague notions of division and transition only useful for textual references.[86] The Song's artistic unity has caused scholars to disagree on its precise shape and structure, yet no conclusion has been set in stone. As Bergant (2011:15) writes "Commentators who argue for literary coherence frequently group individual poems into distinct units based on characterisation, plot, or literary pattern".

Francis Landy (2011:36) argues that the Song is far from being without a clear structure as it offers an abundance of structural clues (cf. also Exum, 2005:17). According to Bergant (2001:14-15), it is debatable whether the Song's literary unity

[86] See Pope (1977:40) for a more in-depth discussion of the Song's division throughout the ages.

should be claimed on the basis of identical imagery and themes, seeing that love poems generally share in such characteristics. The similarity of style, repetition of patterns, the consistency in the characters' behaviour, and the coherent plot, all suggests some kind of literary unity in the final form(s) of the poem. However, the same criterion is applied by readers who view the book as a collection of discrete poems. Bergant (2001:15) thus argues that this very procedure has led to great disparity in enumeration, ranging from five to fifty-two poems.[87]

Stadelmann (1992:7) maintains that the Song is a compilation of eight poems, structured by parallels and chiastic patterns,[88] belonging together. Garrett (1996: 375) is of opinion that scholars such as Fox and Murphy[89] challenges the arguments of the Song serving as an anthology, making compelling cases for the unity of the Song. Pope (1977:46) provides an analysis of Cheryl Exum's conclusive perspective of the Song's structure, arguing that her method in analysis is a clear attempt to isolate the poetic units, examining the form and stylistic characteristic of each poem, as well as to establish the parallels among the poems. Exum's analysis proceeds from the discovery that Song 2:7-3:5 and 5-6:3 are as Pope (1977:46) would put it, "carefully constructed parallel poems".

It is on this basis that a search was rendered for structural parallels in other units within the Song. The search resulted [90] in the discernment of other pairs of parallel poems causing scholars to conclude that the Song consist of six poems of which the first and last forms an inclusion, creating the occurrence of the A B A' B'[91] order. Pope

[87] Bergant (2001:15) provides her readers with the following literary structure as possibility for the unity of the Song of Songs: "1:1; 1:2-2:7; 2:8-3:5; 3:6-5:1; 5:2-6:3; 6:4-8:4 and 8:5-14. This structure is based on identification of both speakers and literary patterns." Moreover, Bergant provides his readers with an elaborate explanation of his identified structure, by arguing that the superscription (1:1) is clearly set apart from the rest of the book. The first and second units (Song 1:2-2:7; 2:8-3:5), according to Bergant, are delineated by the same solemn adjuration as is directed to the daughters of Jerusalem (2:7; 3:5). The third unit, which includes verses 3:6-5:1, begins with a poem independent of that which precedes it, and is filled by the man's praise for his loved one, while the fourth (Song 5:2-6:3) is a comparable praise by the woman. Bergant's fifth unit (6:4-8:4) is delineated by the solemn adjuration found earlier in Song 8:4 (cf. Song 2:7, 3:5). The remaining verses (Song 8:5-14) can be viewed as a collection of disparate poems (Bergant, 2001:15).

[88] See Stadelmann (1992:7) for a visual explanation of the poem's chiastic patterns and parallels.

[89] Garrett (1993:375) explains Fox and Murphy's arguments as follows: "Fox, for example, points to the high number of repetitious and associative sequences, as well as to the consistent character portrayal, as evidence for the unity of the whole. Murphy, similarly, notes the existence of common refrains, common themes, and common words and phrases."

[90] See Pope (1977:46) for a visual portrayal of the discernment of other pairs of parallel in the poems.

[91] See Pope (1977:46) for a visual outlay of Exum's parallel poems.

(1977:46) describes this as follows: “Since the proper articulation of form serves as an indication of proper understanding of meaning, the results of this analysis will have implications for the interpretation of the Song of Songs in general”[92].

Landy (2005:30) highlights the relevance of both the reader and writer by arguing that the Song’s poetic unity can be maintained by the input of both reader and writer. By this, he suggests that critics should specify whether they are applying their own reactions toward the text or whether they are inferring to the fact that the text is the product of a tradition, as well as that of an individual.

> A critic, if he or she is honest, will pursue relations and differences as far as they will go, guided however by an inherent tendency towards synthesis, and a presupposition fostered by tradition and the ‘found unity’ on the page (Landy, 2005:30).

The critics who deny the Song as an entity agrees on the number of units into which to divide the Song. Those who see it as a cycle differs on the principle of the organisation, while those who suppose the Song’s integrity does so with much diversity (Landy, 2005:32). Landy (2005:32) comments on critical opinions and the unity of the Song:

> Critical opinions are fairly equally divided between those who think the Song to be an anthology of lyrics, without intrinsic connection, that have somehow fused; those who consider it a collection of songs, but with a unity at the level of redactor or composer; and those who believe that it is single poem.[93]

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[92] Pope (1977:47) highlights two conclusions made by Exum in her structural analysis. Firstly, mentioning that her work has proven a unity of authorship with an intentional design and a sophistication of poetic style. The structure has thus delineated, proving the theory of the Song being an anthology or collection as correct. The second conclusion of Exum’s work holds implications for the dramatic theory. While assuming basic unity in the Song, the analysis has found the Song to accommodate speakers, scenes, and plots. The analysis thus argues against the division of the poems on the basis of different speakers and scenes and is in favour of isolating the poetic units which is guided by stylistic considerations. The identified dialogue does not serve as a key to structure, yet structure may serve as a key to dialogue. Pope (1977:47) argues that the limited scope of investigation is more intricate than indicated, implying the need for further study. The exegetical ingenuity, of which the Song has seen more than any other opus of comparable size, will thus be able to turn it to a variety of different uses in support of different interpretations.

[93] Landy (2005:32), in referring to Exum’s explanation on critics and the Song’s unity, argues that that more scholars are convinced of the Song’s unity than is generally believed. “The critical orthodoxy that the Song is an anthology is belied if one examines the literature.” Landy further argues that, those who find themselves attracted to the song, will most likely be the ones who take it seriously, due to the human tendency to create wholes out of experience. In conclusion, it is important to mention that Landy

> These views are not uniform, and shade into each other; there is an astonishing variety of critical formulation[94].

To conclude, this sub-section that highlights the disputes regarding the Song's unity and structure, as is evident in the former quote by Francis Landy, stating that critical opinions are to be viewed as paramount, as it emphasises the diversity of critical opinions and biblical literature.[95]

Throughout this sub-section, it has become clear that scholarly disputes have found no settlement, and that a vast array of readings and interpretations of the Song is to be found. In conclusion, this study will lend support to Landy's views regarding this critical analysis, as every interpreter should first identify their personal reactions toward the text, as it influences the way in which the text and its traditions are approached. The very fact that scholars disagree in their analyses of the Song, portrays much about the evidence necessary to make their patterns work (Longman, 2001:56).

3.7.2. Plot

The former section clearly foregrounds the debate of the Song being a poetic text, filled with great lyrical poetry and complexities. The discontinuous form of lyrical poetry, which revels in images and words, encourages the reader not to expect a linear form of unfolding events as it formulates a plot. Exum (2005:42) provides her readers with a fitting explanation of the Song's lack of plot:

> Sudden shifts of speaker and topic and the fact that the Song repeats both longer and shorter poetic units, ever returning to the same themes and images, argues against a clearly developed plot.

Exum (2005:42) refers to the "powerful readerly tendency to read sequentially and to make sense of a literary work as a whole; in other words, to read for the plot".[96] When

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sharply disagrees with Exum and others, who strive to identify the Song's structure and unity, by arguing that it the very process of the integration of the fragmentary, lies at the heart of the song.

[94] The situation has been complicated in recent years, and the organic approach rendered more respectable, by the increasing awareness of the formal complexity of biblical literature, reflecting both the willingness to give it the same attention as other literatures and the realisation that even in narrative the principle of organisation is not on the whole sequential (Landy, 2005:32).

[95] Longman (2001:54) lends support to Landy's quote by arguing that no two scholars agree in the finer detail, although one might identify various schools of thought on the matter.

[96] When reading a biblical book like the Song of Songs, readers tend to avoid fragmented reading by starting at the beginning and reading it through to the end. "Most readers make connections between

imagining the protagonists as the same consistent two characters throughout the Song by relating all experiences throughout the text with them, the reader automatically creates a "story", discovering a plot of sorts.

In summary, it is of interest to mention alternative perspectives regarding the Song's plot, such as that of Bergant (2001:15), who argues for a more-or-less coherent plot of searching, finding, longing, and losing. These patterns seem to be consistent in the behaviour of the characters throughout the collection of poems. According to Exum (2005:43), Longman (2001:15-17, 55-56) views the Song as an anthology of twenty-three poems, finding "progression" within the Song, yet still lacking a plot. Longman (2001:55-56) also remarks that the repetition of scenes and refrains and the consistency of character portrayal, provides readers with a certain lens as mentioned earlier. Garrett (1993:375) argues that the Song is a collection of songs/poems into a single piece with a unified structure, placing the consummated marriage in Song 4:16-5:1 as the focal point of the poem, creating a chiastic structure.

It is thus clear that scholars provide no unity on this subject. However tempting it may be, readers should beware of looking for narrative progression[97] within a lyrical poem such as the Song. Exum (2005:45) affirms this by emphasising that, whatever narrative development the reader might perceive, it must remain secondary to the Song's principal dynamic, namely its circularity.

3.7.3. Genre

The Song of Song is without a doubt one of the most unique books in the Hebrew Bible, as it alone celebrates sexual love intertwined with spirituality. A former section regarding the canonicity of the Song, clearly highlights the fact that God (YHWH) is absent within the Song, yet scholars such as Walsh (2000:188) and Garrett (1993:366) do not shy away from identifying the Song and its spirituality as wisdom literature.

It is clear that the Song does not explore wisdom in the same manner as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, yet it does share in the celebration of human love and life. According to

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the parts of the poem simply by reading for coherence and correlation and by naturalising events in order to make them intelligible" (Exum, 2005:42).

[97] According to Exum (2005:44), the only genuine narrative development that takes place is the woman's speech, as she is the only one telling stories about love. Therefore, instead of making her a storyteller, the poet has allocated descriptive speech (cf. Song 5:10–16), as well as fragments of dialogue (cf. Song 1:2-7; 7:10) to her.

Garrett (1993:366), the Song holds affinities to wisdom literature, a fact that should not be overlooked as wisdom in the Bible is meant to guide readers in their manner of living.[98] Landy (2001:24) writes of the relation between the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes, as both perform the same task and use the same symbolic figure.

> The Song supplants the one term which if not literally missing, cannot quite be accommodated in Ecclesiastes. For according to the Song love alone is as strong as death; it is greater than every pleasure and all political power.

Walsh (2000:191) affirms this by arguing that the author of Ecclesiastes questions everything about life, yet nothing about God's existence. On the other hand, the Song of Songs provides its readers with a celebration of all things in human life and love whilst never mentioning God. Moreover, the Song makes use of the techniques of the wisdom tradition, namely careful comparison, the exploration and the seeking of understanding the world, and the classification of experience, in order to expose its values (Landy, 2001:24). The Song of Songs will always be a complexly beautiful and unique poem within the Hebrew Bible, due to its unique participation in wisdom literature.

Longman (2001:21) highlights some important information by writing that genre identification arises from interaction with the text itself. The application of a hermeneutical lens/approach such as Body Theology will thus be an appropriate guide on the journey of unlocking responsible interpretation. The exploration of 'desire' through the eyes of the reader, coupled with their interpretation of the text, is deeply intertwined with the identification of the Song's genre. Longman (2001:21) affirms this by highlighting that the awareness of the Song's historical factors will determine what the reader sees in the text.

In conclusion, God's absence from the Song has not prevented the Song of Songs from being identified as wisdom literature. Rather, the theme of absence, incorporating God's absence, challenges the reader to identify the constant spiritual richness within the poem: a richness dressed by sexual love and desire.

[98] "Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs are written from a human perspective, without God as a palpable literary character, without God as an expressed given" (Walsh, 2000:191).

3.7.4. Theme

Exum (2005:73) states that the majority of modern scholars generally agree that human love is the subject of the Song. The compelling work of Carey Walsh contributes to the identification of important themes in the Song of Songs, in particular, adding desire as an undeniably important subject that will also be important for this current study.[99]

> The history of the interpretation of this extraordinary ancient Hebrew poem about desire could be read as a history of its reader's desire – desire to find deeper meaning in it than its plain meaning alone, desire to find a story behind its lyrics or anchor it in a particular life setting (Sitz im Leben), desire not simply to read the Song but to participate in it (Exum, 2005:73).

It is thus clear that interpretations reveal various distinctive facets within the Song, opening corresponding possibilities for readers and their interpretations. The history of both readers and their interpretations brings various allegorical and/or mystical approaches to light, as is used in a spiritual understanding of the Song of Songs. God's absence from the Song of Songs should not be overlooked as it provides an open door for new interpretational possibilities.

A negative viewing of God's absence should not be encouraged as it is absence which provides readers with a new theological approach to spirituality and the Song of Songs. Moreover, the Song of Songs does not present any clear moral instructions regarding love and desire when compared to the other writings already collected in the canon. Walsh (2000:4) comments on the role of sexual excitement nestled within the spiritual reading of the poem:

> For most of the postbiblical history, however, the Song of Songs was read not as a book of erotica – which it is – but as an allegory of Israel's love for God, or for Christians, of Christ's love for the church. The sexual excitement

[99] Throughout this study, 'desire' will serve as the main subject, applying love as a 'sub-theme' in the proses of unpacking the various elements within 'desire'. Walsh (2000:385) writes the following regarding 'desire' as a prominent theme within the Song: "Desire remains the theme throughout its eight chapters. Significantly, the two lovers never end up consummating their passions. Since their desire is never satisfied, human yearning remains in tension and in focus. This aspect of the Song, that the lover's desire is not satisfied, is crucial, yet is often overlooked. For the Song of Songs is not about sex per se, but about sexual yearning. It is not goal-oriented toward a consummation, nor does it limit its vision of sexuality to biology. Instead, the Song slows down and probes the experiential plane of sexual want."

> was read in effect as a symbol of spiritual anticipation. Yet spiritual allegory does not really tame or domesticate the Song, or reduce it to a merely pious devotional. The metaphors of desire still provoke and excite response from the reader, who then has to remind himself or herself that all this fevered lust is really about God and us.

Walsh's identification of God within the Songs' all-consuming erotica is enlightening, as it breaks free from traditional approaches, while emphasising that lust, particularly *female* lust[100] (which should first be understood outside of some pious allegory),[101] can be celebrated. As she argues: "The metaphor's vehicle, that is, the image used, must be grasped, before the possibilities of its tenor – that is, what idea that image can represent – become apparent" (Walsh, 2000:4).

Walsh (2000:7) argues that the Bible taps into one's emotions, making it relatable. It is when readers place all their discomfort and defensiveness aside, that stories can awaken and stir emotions.

> The Song of Songs is itself notorious for not giving an inch on its historical context, its date of composition, its precise situation, the identity of its characters, and the location of their meetings. The whatness of what is happening in any kind of plot or narrative is so far inscrutable (Walsh, 2000:7).

Walsh therefore makes a good point by asserting that the central position of desire, functioning as a main subject and focus point within the Song, places other finer details in the background.

3.8. The Divine-Human Relationship (Theology of the Song of Songs)

In light of the former sections which have dealt with matters such literary analysis, dating, authorship, history of interpretation, the role of the reader, and so forth, it is important to insist on the primary significance of the Song as it relates to the undeniable aspect of our humanity, namely, love and sexuality. As mentioned earlier, God (YHWH) does not feature in the Song, nor does the poem contain any overt

[100] The reference to female lust is of importance as it strives to ensure equality between female and male experience of desire.
[101] This allegorical interpretation encompasses both Old Testament and Christian interpretations of the images.

religious or theological content. Yet, when approaching the Song as wisdom literature, the reader cannot deny the spiritual (and theological) richness of the book.

Bergant (2001:10) argues that a literary reading of the straightforward eroticism of the Song may pose a challenge to those who wish to classify the book as a biblical resource for spirituality.[102] It is therefore essential to foster a deep understanding of spirituality, as much depends on it. The human dependence on spirituality is riddled with various definitions and systems of making meaning, producing various options of integration of a text into all aspects of human existence, and encourages a conversation with the reader's fundamental worldview (Bergant, 2001:10). Walsh (2000:163) emphasises the intertwined nature of desire and spirituality as follows:

> Spirituality, for example, is no hedged bet to soften the edges of a stressful life; still less is it marked solely by a lazy obedience to a tradition we just ended up inheriting. Instead, the spiritual quest is precisely – no more, and nothing less than – the yearning for meaning, the hungry desire for it, and, just as important, the painful coping with its periodic absence. That we all search and work for more meaning, for fuller lives during the course of our lives, makes of us all spiritual beings.

In the case of the Hebrew Bible and the Song of Songs, spirituality may not be an explicit element within the text or even in life, but is nevertheless present. According to Walsh (2000:211) "the hiddenness itself has worlds to teach us by disarming our impatient insistence on empirical demonstrations of divine care". Longman (2001:59) builds on this notion by arguing that lives within churches and synagogues would be severely depraved of the opportunity to flourish in the absence of the Song, as sexuality is a major part of the human experience. Longman (2001:59) continues: "God in his wisdom has spoken through the poet(s) of the Song to encourage us as well as warn us about its power in our lives."

Garrett (1993:377), building on scholars like Karl Barth, concludes that the Song, unlike Proverbs, is not riddled with warnings on the dangers of sexuality which encourages chastity, but is rather a celebration of the passion and joys of love. It is

[102] Walsh (2000:211) provides her readers with a relevant explanation of the difference between theology and spirituality. Where theology always revolves around God, spirituality revolves around the soul and what it needs to be nourished (which often includes themes around God).

thus of importance to raise the marriage debate, as scholars throughout the ages have resisted to encourage these joys outside of the restraints of the marriage covenant. Yet, the Song rarely uses the marital language, creating the necessity for an ongoing debate (Bergant, 1993:379; Longman, 2001:59).

Bergant (2001:11) emphasises the importance of integrating spirituality and sexuality by arguing that the present generation is clearly concerned about reuniting sexuality with the experience of the sacred. This is without a doubt a serious matter, as the present generation is not satisfied with the disembodied understanding of faith, but is rather interested in the manner in which experiences of sexuality influences a person's religious perspective. There is, without a doubt, a definite shift away from a theology that sets up a false dichotomy between matter and spirituality, as this is most likely a root aspect of racism, tyranny, and sexism, and does not uphold the incarnational integrity.[103]

3.9. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is safe to say that the Song's spirituality calls readers to pay attention to the wonders of a delightfully, complex life. Biblical theophany's is no longer left in the privileged hands of kings, prophets, priests, and patriarchs, but has become accessible to all those in love and tempted by lust. Sharing in Walsh's (2000:216) concluding thoughts of categorising the Song as having a theology of absence as seen through God's absence in the text, serving as analogous with the contemporary world. The Song's genre identification as wisdom literature, borrows its readers the needed authority to identify the Song's constant spiritual richness as it is a richness dressed by desire and sexual love. In the end, the Song holds a theology of absence, yet manages to surprise its reader with the celebration of human life's sensuality within an overflowing creation (Walsh, 2000:216). The Song thus holds a deep understanding of spirituality and should not be taken lightly, as much of human life depends on it. In a small town such Beaufort West with its distorted understanding of the Bible, the Song of Song has a lot to provide as current generation is not satisfied with the disembodied

[103] "Since the heart of biblical spirituality is love of God and love of the other, and since sexuality is the psychological and psychological grounding of the human ability to love, sexuality plays a very important role in spirituality. Therefore, in order to be meaningful in the contemporary world, any spiritual interpretation of the Song of Songs will necessarily have to flow from a worldview that sees sexuality as an integral component of spirituality" (Bergant, 2011:11).

understanding of faith, but is rather interested in the manner in which experiences of sexuality influences a person's religious perspective.

The importance of human life and well-being should not be taken for granted as its fulfilment is unattainable in the presence of a rejected bodyself. It is by embracing the rediscovery of humanity's spirituality in Body-and-Sexual Theology that human well-being is achieved. This matter will receive further attention in the following chapter, as it strives to mould a much-needed lens of Body Theology, hoping to provide the readers with a responsible approach to the Song of Songs and its sub-themes.

Chapter 4

An Embodied Self

Your lips, O my spouse, drip as the honeycomb; Honey and milk are under your tongue; and the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.

(Song of Songs 4:11)

4.1 Introduction

Throughout the centuries, humans have feared, mistreated, and discounted their own bodies and sexualities, creating an undeniably negative connotation to these elements, continuously spilling over into recurrently developing modern cultures. This has often led to the phenomenon of idolising, and even glorifying various distorted expressions of the body (Nelson, 1992:9). The deep symbolism of the body nestled within the human culture, as viewed through Isherwood and Stuart's looking glass, is arguably nestled within both the individual as well their community's manner of expressing themselves and their *bodyselves* (1998:10). Isherwood and Stuart thus inspire readers to deduce that the importance of bodily expression and its deep symbolism is conclusively inseparable from human wholeness and the fulfilment of their destiny to wholeness of *bodyselves.*

Due to ongoing negative bodily attachments throughout centuries, it will be in the interest of this study to mention that the current chapter will strive to bring the history of Body Theology and sexuality to light, identifying and wrestling with its challenges and usage in practice. It will be important to this chapter to focus on the definition of the body itself, hoping to obtain an enlightened understanding of the human body, its companioning theology, and the history which has shaped it. Furthermore, it will be important to reflect upon the importance and relevance of the application of Body Theology, thus asking the question: "Why Body Theology?".

In the final instance, it will be important to reflect on the sacredness of sexuality. This chapter will highlight the inseparability of Body Theology and sexuality, and how these concepts work together in shaping the wholeness as *bodyselves*. This chapter will thus strive to bring together the history of Body Theology, Christianity and sexuality, and,

hopefully, serve as an informing chapter to this study and the study of the depth of Body Theology as a whole.

It is of note that this study can be identified as a work of Christian theology, implying that it will adhere to the reality of God, God's presence in the church and the world, as well as the assumption that God is revealed in and through Jesus Christ. Thatcher (2015:3) argues that both teachers and students of theology need not adhere to the incorporation of their personal religious views to the study of theology, as the study of Christianity speaks out of its own tradition.[104]

Thatcher (2015:4) suggests that the ongoing struggle with Christian theology, and, more specifically, the Trinitarian aspect of Christianity, will remain an unsolvable matter unless believers address questions regarding the very heartbeat of humanity, namely Body Theology, sexuality, and gender. The unresolved elements within Christian theology have escalated to a concerning point as questions regarding sexuality press on contemporary Christian churches with an undeniably devastating force (Thatcher, 2015:4). Shallow answers to questions regarding sexual justice, stability of gender, and the depth of theology within sexual desire, can at times even serve as a destructive force. Therefore, these questions, and the way(s) in which they have been answered (or ignored), needs to be addressed.

As a theological student, continually wrestling with the misplaced understanding regarding sex and sexuality within a challenging South African context, I have been compelled to delve deeper into the complex relationship(s) between humans, their *bodyselves*, and theology. The theological element of the highlighted relationship between humans, *bodyselves* and theology will be guided by the study of Song of Songs and its application in one particular context that reveals the current social challenges, i.e. Beaufort West, a small community located in the Karoo. The application of the various discussion points, as mentioned in the paragraphs above, will serve as a guiding lens through which to view the Song of Songs and its application in daily lives.[105]

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[104] Adrian Thatcher (2015:3) argues that religious studies and theology are different, yet related, as both realms uphold their own methods and suppositions and still constantly inform one another.
[105] The "the application to daily lives" serves as an umbrella concept, referring to the relationship between humans, their bodyselves, and theology.

4.2 The Development of Body Theology

An exploration of the history of the development of Body Theology cannot be overemphasised, since it exposes the very nature of the human race's crooked understanding of the *bodyself*. The body in itself is deeply symbolic within the human culture since it functions as a means through which the person and their community expresses themselves.[106] The exact meaning of body symbolism within human culture is a matter of constant debate: a debate which shall receive attention throughout this chapter (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:10).

The western society, as viewed from a generalising perspective, portrays an ambiguous attitude towards the body. This ambiguity is viewable in the manner in which the western society talks about their bodies, often defining it as property (*having* a body, rather than *being* a body). This way of phrasing has been somewhat problematic (Stuart 1997: 49 & Nelson, 1992:43). Issues of bodily identity is a worrying factor in an age where aesthetics seems to have replaced metaphysics,[107] seeing that the body is arguably all we have (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:10).

The importance of the human body is so overwhelming that a distinctive genre of theology, namely Body Theology has come to life. Stuart and Isherwood (1998:11) break free from the so-called 'newness' orbiting Body Theology, by arguing that Christian theology has essentially always been an embodied theology rooted in sacraments, resurrection, and creation.

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[106] As discussed in the former section.

[107] The traditional usage of the word 'metaphysics' stem from ancient Greece, where it was used as a combination of two words, *'meta'*, meaning beyond, and physics. It was thus a combination meaning over and beyond physics (Simons, 2009:4). The general definition found in most dictionaries, defines metaphysics as a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature and first cause of 'being'. The modern world has rewarded the word 'metaphysics' with a broader field of interest. When an individual expresses an interest in metaphysics, it may be a combination or just one of the following subjects: philosophy, religion, astrology, parapsychology, reincarnation, life after death, etc. The so-called common denominator of all these subjects is the exploration of reality and the manner in which such knowledge may benefit human life – both collectively and individually (Simons, 2009:4).
Lecturers at the University of Sedan argue that the search for the meaning of life, truth and purpose cannot be isolated from basic spiritual questions (Masters, 2017). "In a more absolute sense, we like to think of Metaphysics as dealing with the basic questions of life, i.e., the relationship of man, mind and the universe, which leads to answers to the age-old questions of anyone who has truly paused to reflect on life by asking the most fundamental questions of all – 'who am I; what am I; where have I been, and where am I going?'" (Masters, 2017).

In the discourse of Christian theology, the body has always applied two analogies, namely the analogy of faith and the analogy of being.[108] The body is thus both the recipient and site of revelation. The recipient nature of revelation within the body allows for the appropriation of embodiment in both reality and Christian scriptures, which Christian theology has always strived to apply. The gospel in the New Testament speaks of the birth of Jesus, his life and mission: a mission begun by water, touch, and a dove. Isherwood and Stuart (1998:11) illuminate the fact that Jesus healed by touch and forgiveness. The life of Jesus was thus a very physical one, as he was an incarnate/embodied being.

Despite Jesus Christ's embodied being and Christian theology's belief that all believers should strive to be like Christ, for most of the Christian era, Christians have feared, mistrusted, and discounted their own bodies (Nelson, 1992:9). Stuart (1997:49) argues that humans seem to upkeep a certain talk of the body, articulating the body as a flesh machine operated by a soul. He writes: "sometimes we feel imprisoned by a machine that will not work the way we want it, that constantly lets us down" (Stuart, 1997:49). These subconscious thoughts drive humans to judge others according to their bodies, punishing and rewarding others based on an ideal body size and capability.

It is thus appropriate to mention western cultures' idealisation of small and tight bodies – bodies with no spare flesh. A fear of an incomplete, fleshy body is heightened by threats of illness or disease, all of which express the deep underlying fear of the body, causing alienation from it. This long lived bodily alienation has been shaped by our Christian heritage, antiquity, and believers who shaped it (Stuart, 1997:50).

The Christian heritage and those who shaped it, deems to spur humans on in the upkeep of a dualistic mindset,[109] resulting in a war of spirit versus body (Nelson, 1992:9). This ongoing dualistic war between spirit and body has found no relieve in the arms of the religious enterprise, but is rather constantly fuelling bodily alienation.

[108] Isherwood & Stuart (1998:11) make use of the Latin phrases 'analogia entis' (analogy of being), and 'analogia fidei' (analogy of faith), whilst also stating that the body is both the recipient and site of revelation.

[109] Nelson succeeds in simplistically explaining dualism and its effects on human life when writing that dualism forces us into a war of body versus spirit. This alienating war manifests itself in a variety of ways: being present in our sexism, and distorted, and often violent, meanings of our cultural masculinity (Nelson, 1992:9).

James Nelson (1992:29) writes the following on the growing fear of the body and sexuality, finding no relief in the religious enterprise:

> It is commonly observed that religion is a very ambiguous human enterprise. The creative power of religion is great, for the divine presence is, indeed, often mediated with life-giving power through religious patterns of doctrine, morals, worship, and spirituality. The religious enterprise is also one of the most dangerous of all human enterprises, since it is always tempted to claim ultimate sanction for its humanly constructed beliefs and practices. This ambiguous mix of the creative and the destructiveness in religion is particularly evident when it comes to religious dealings with human sexuality.

This ambiguous mix is encouraged by the dynamisms of human sexuality and Body Theology, giving religious enterprises the power to manipulate both good and evil. This has caused history and its various religions to pay an unusual amount of attention to these dimensions of human life whilst attempting to control it. Nelson conclusively also refers to the already mentioned fear which has sprouted its wings and taken flight in the lives of all humans (Nelson, 1992:29).

Christianity upholds a theology of incarnation, holding the belief that it took the incarnation of God, the divine becoming flesh, to overcome sin. This theology of incarnation sheds light on the redemptive nature of the body of Christ: the same body which Christians believe to consume during the Eucharist. The implementation of the Eucharist provides a very physical, fleshy connection between humans and God, thus encouraging a positive approach to the body (Nelson, 1992:16). It is of interest to mention that a theology of incarnation does not guarantee an outcome where humans will treat their bodies with respect or view it as a source of divine revelation. Rather, it is an entity of hope: the hope that individuals will grasp the sanctity and symbolic depth of the body (Nelson, 1992:16).

The Christian faith was moulded by the dualistic lines of Greek philosophy and Jewish origin, among which Greek philosophy carried most of the weight. Ancient Jews did not share in the distress of bodily alienation as they regarded human beings holistically before their interaction with Persian and Greek philosophies (Stuart, 1997:50). Christianity's advancement into the Roman Empire produced encounters with Greek

philosophies such as Stoicism, in which the body is regarded as an inferior self, prone to decay, death, passion, and change. Christianity did not share in the sentiment of despising the body, but rather strived to *control* the body with the hope that the soul might reach freedom from passion and other bodily 'inferiorities'.[110] A soul free from bodily 'inferiorities' and its passions was viewed as possessing a holy state associated with God (Stuart, 1997:50).

Stuart (1997:51) refers to the fact that many Christians undertook these bodily ideas with the hope of demonstrating their belonging to the Kingdom of Heaven and not the Roman Empire. In totality, it was the undertaking of this dualistic mindset that led Christians to the debate about the body and its essentiality to personhood. These debates have led many church fathers,[111] such as Origen and Ambrose of Milan, to abandon all symbols of bodiliness, thus doing away with sexuality and its symbolic role in human life (Stuart 1997:51).

According to Stuart (1997:51), the abandonment of sexuality is mostly assigned to the belief that something this promiscuous and sexual is a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God in the Genesis account. Others resisted such conclusive thoughts while being mindful of the importance of incarnation and the belief that God is the creator of bodies and therefore intensely involved in humanity's bodiliness (Stuart, 1997:51). This constant dualistic presence was at a time so overwhelming that the church decided to declare it as heretical.[112]

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) did not initially share in the formerly mentioned church fathers' abandonment of bodiliness, as he strongly believed that human beings were undoubtedly created by God. According to Augustine, it was clear that God's creation of the human being included physicality, as well as sexually. Therefore, sexual

[110] Stuart (1997:51) makes use of the word *apatheia* when referring to the freedom that the soul should strive for. This is a freedom from all bodily passions.
[111] Isherwood and Stuart (1998:17-18) mainly makes use of the heading 'Abusive Fathers' rather than 'Church Fathers' when referring to first century theologians. The usage of this heading is significant as it implies the abusive nature of the theology practiced by the church fathers. The abusiveness of the theology was prominently never felt by the church fathers and their male counterparts, as women where the ones to be avoided and suppressed.
[112] Isherwood and Stuart (1998:17) provide insightful explanations of the multiple understandings of dualistic thoughts and that which it could lead to. The Gnostics viewed all material creations as evil, leading some to advocate an ascetic life whilst others decided to abandon the world. There were those who believed that evil entered the world at the creation of the woman and therefore opted for the avoidance of all women.

relations were not necessarily regarded as sinful. However, in the end, the conviction regarding the sinfulness of the fall converted Augustine to the former church fathers' argument of sexuality and bodiliness as sinful elements of the post-fallen human being. Augustine thus added desire as a state of disobedience to God, causing generations of human beings to wrestle with desire and their uncontrollable bodies (Stuart, 1997:51).

Augustine's influence, alongside the influence of other church fathers, is still present in contemporary Christian thought on bodiliness, sexuality, and desire, often leading to the idea that humans are indiscriminately and rampantly promiscuous (Stuart, 1997:52), as a result of the fall of humanity. A fear and rejection of said promiscuity has manifested in faith communities in the form of a number of life-denying and extreme ideas, rules, and practises. According to Isherwood and Stuart (1998:17) monastic rules and practices reflect this ongoing fear and even loathing of the flesh. It is this loathing of the flesh which has often manifested in the abuse of the body with the hope of achieving spiritual perfection, thus encouraging an underlying dualistic mindset.[113]

The given information clearly portrays the unfortunate effects of the church fathers' negative influence on both western religion and society. This negativity has clearly spilled over to the understanding of sex, acknowledging it as pleasurable, yet disgusting and degrading, since it views lust as an enemy of humanity. Moreover, the distinction between the two sexes, namely male and female, was greatly influenced by the theology of the church fathers, identifying men as the dominant spiritual gender and women as the weak, physical gender (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:18).

Isherwood and Stuart (1998:18) wrote the following on the fathers' understanding of the distinctive difference between men and women, or better formulated, the division between the spiritual and the physical:

> Every act of intercourse was seen as the spirit (man) becoming entrapped in sinful flesh (woman) and women were viewed as insatiable and innate temptress… The Fathers, while seeing women as inferior, also feared them.

[113] Western monasticism's strive for spiritual perfection results in activities which hope to show the extent of bodily weakness and spiritual strength, leaving no room for the celebration of the body and its holiness (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:17).

> Women's bodies were thought to possess all kinds of power, their hair or their menstrual blood could turn wine sour, corrode iron or cause dogs to go rabid. This power to corrupt had to be tightly controlled if women were to approach holiness.

These ideas, which have encouraged control over women in order to instil modest Christian behaviours, is without a doubt perverse, as the upkeep of such dominant behaviour is abusive. Isherwood & Stuart support scholars such as Karen Armstrong (1986) who boldly addresses such perverseness, stating that the church fathers' advice can, at times, be read as a sexual assault on women (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:19).[114] It is of importance to mention that the application of the abusiveness towards women, and the upkeep of bodily degradation, is not just an assault on women, but also men. However, it is apparent that the bodies of women received the most abuse and disdain.

It is of interest to mention that there were a few women who resisted these dualistic attitudes and their suppressions. These include female mystics, such as St Teresa of Avila.[115] "It is these women who provided bodily knowledge[116] of Christ even whilst contemporary male theologians were teaching that all experience of Christ must be spiritual and non-bodily" (Stuart, 1997:52).

Despite the bodily rejection, degradation, depredation, and dualistic attitudes towards sexual desire within Christian traditions, there were those who provided opposition to this form of theology. The desert fathers and mothers strove to live rigorous abstinence lives with the intention of mastering the body and its desires. Arguing that the application of this lifestyle provided them with a window of opportunity with which they obtained the knowledge that the body and soul were never enemies but rather interdependent. Stuart (1997:53) also writes that many of the desert mothers and

[114] Isherwood & Stuart (1998:19) provide further information regarding the history of body theology and the abusiveness of the church fathers and their theology in the lives of both men and women.
[115] Stuart (1997:52) provides further information regarding St Teresa of Avila and her powerful physical experience of a union with Christ.
[116] The term 'bodily knowledge' does not entirely coincide with the traditional dualistic understanding, as body and knowledge does not really coincide in this framework. The traditional dualistic understanding associates the body with desire, whilst knowledge is associated with spirituality and the mind (Stuart, 1997:52).

fathers applied vivid sexual imagery whilst describing the relationship between God and their souls.

In the end, it is complex to assess the degree(s) to which Christianity has influenced western traditions, the development of a patriarchal culture, and general attitudes towards the body. Scholars such as Isherwood, Stuart, and Nelson believe that western culture upholds clear patriarchal views of both the church and the body. Unfortunately, it has become clear that these views hold a great amount negative traits and lead to suppressive actions. As theologians, we need to address the destructiveness of dualistic attitudes and its covenant with the negative concept of bodily imprisonment. Theologians are thus challenged to replace bodily guilt and repression with that of bodily celebration.

4.3 The Body and its Dualistic Holiness

The former section has insightfully touched on dualism, Christianity, and the history which has shaped current dualistic attitudes in western society and its approach to spirituality. The current section will strive to elaborate, or rather contribute, to the former section's information on dualism, hoping to shed some light on dualism and its various forms. Moreover, this section will focus on the holiness factor of the body, as it concurrently has a direct impact on the daily understanding and application of Body Theology.

Nelson (1992:124), serving as a scholar in the field of Body Theology, stresses that the field cannot be limited to the ethical prescription of a personal expression of the physical self, or simply the theological description of the body. Rather, Body Theology is identifiable in the manner in which theology is applied within the viewing of the body and its bodily experiences, regarding it as occasions of revelations (Nelson, 1992:9). Moreover, Nelson asserts that an individual does not own a body, but is rather identifiable as a body, constantly interpreting itself and creating new meaning(s) through itself.[117]

[117] "I do not just *have* a body, I a*m* a body. I am always interpreting myself as a body, creating my meanings as a body, and using images and language to give significance to my bodily functions and dysfunctions, states of health and disease" (Nelson, 1992:124).

According to Adrian Thatcher (1993:30), there is a great lack of agreement amongst individuals regarding the definition of what it means to be a human being.[118] It is due to this lack of agreement that humans have given way to the application of dualistic attitudes, arguing whether the body and soul serve as separate entities, or whether the soul is reducible to nothing more than bodily property (1993:30). The ongoing debate, accompanied by dualistic attitudes, is also identifiable under the umbrella term, the ideology of patriarchy.

It is with this knowledge in mind that it would be of interest to repeat the fact that Christianity did not invent dualism and its central teaching. Nevertheless, Nelson (1992:125) argues that the church should have known better than to embrace philosophies of the ancient classical world. The church, therefore, while not inventing dualism and its patriarchal ideology, cannot plead innocence in the perpetuation of these ideas.

The rise of modernisation has brought new fields of thought and study to the fore, especially within the religious sphere. Many of these fields encourage humanity to break free from the shackles of dualism and its ideology of patriarchy. This escape is supported by scholars such as Isherwood, Stuart, Nelson, and Thatcher, thus driving Thatcher (1993:331) to write of the unmaking[119] of dualism, whilst remaking[120] human sexuality in the light of biblical expectations.

The daily unmaking of dualism, accompanied by the remaking of human sexuality, is without a doubt a much-needed process as the application of the full embodiment of God's divine nature provides individuals with the possibility of healthy partnerships, something every human yearns for (Thatcher, 1992:2). The Christian faith offers more

[118] An abridged definition of being human cannot truly be given due to the fact that a human person is the completeness of what they are, namely, body, soul and mind (Kemmerling, 2014:16).
[119] Thatcher's referral to the 'unmaking' adheres to the undoing of the patriarchy which, through the ages, has systematically discriminated against women, infecting the relationship between men and women (Thatcher, 1993:2).
[120] Thatcher writes of the 'remaking' of both men and women in the image of God when coming to the Christian faith. This 'remaking' refers to the application of the full embodiment of God's divine nature in both human being and flesh. In conclusion, Thatcher (1993:2) argues that both human flesh and blood becomes the living expression of deity and God's life-enhancing love as it is the very heart of God.
By sharing in the 'remaking' and application of the full embodiment of God's divine nature, God grants believers both vision and power to strive for relationships that upholds equality, mutuality, intimate and affirming partnerships (Thatcher, 1993:2).

than just asceticism from sexual relationships.[121] Thatcher (1993:30) provides his readers with some comfort when writing that God is the creator of the body and its unending potential of bodily pleasure and revelations, for "it is in bodily merrymaking and not in body-denying asceticism that most Christians will want to discover the goodness and blessings of God".[122]

In the proses of shedding light on the relationship between God as creator and bodiliness, it is important to mention that sexual theology[123] and theology of sexuality[124], which proclaims the liberating reign of God within human relations, need to serve in turning humanity away from sexist or anthropological dualism, as neither of these can be found in the teachings of Jesus (Thatcher, 1993:40). Thatcher motivates this point by arguing that the body's lesser status in relation to the soul, accompanied by patriarchal views, does not accurately reflect the Christian faith.

By proclaiming God as the creator of the body and its unending potential of bodily pleasure, Christianity turns to Christ, as the enfleshment of God as central to the Christian faith. It is through the acknowledgement of Christ as God incarnate, or enfleshed, that Christians also find themselves created in the image of God. This gives rise to the important question of what it actually means to speak of Christ as the enfleshment of God.

Thatcher (1993:40) writes that it is in Christ that Christians find the supreme disclosure of God's power and grace, and it is through their ordinary bodied lives that humans can experience God's power and grace for themselves. The acceptance of Christ's enfleshment or incarnation breaks free from the patriarchal legacy of knowing God

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[121] Asceticism is the disposal or avoidance of all pleasure, especially pleasures such as sexual pleasures. Since the first century, the pleasure of sexual intercourse has seen many forms of disapproval, thus stripping sexual intercourse of all forms of pleasure and leaving it with nothing else but purpose: sexual intercourse has reproductive intent and nothing more (Thatcher, 1993:38).

[122] The concept of *merrymaking* is directly related to the joyfulness of life and, especially, the joyfulness of sexual activity. Thatcher (1993:2) argues that, unless sex is playful, it should be viewed as intolerable. Merriment can thus be encapsulated in one word, namely, 'pleasure': the deep pleasure in our bodies which serves as a precondition of our humanly gratitude towards God, for God grants humans the key to responsible and passionate loving, namely sexuality (Thatcher, 1993:2).

[123] Nelson (1992:21) defines Sexual Theology as the sexual experience with which humans' approach scripture, interpret traditions and attempt to live out the meaning of the gospel. It is thus a dialogical two-directional inequity.

[124] A Theology of Sexuality argues in a one-directional manner, focusing on Scripture and tradition and what it has to say about human sexuality and how it ought to be expressed. The importance of human experience is avoided unlike Sexual Theology where the association between Scripture, traditions and experience is of importance (Nelson, 1992:21).

abstractly and brings the possibility of “flesh meeting flesh” to life (Thatcher, 1993:40). “It is through human flesh that God became supremely known, and through the body that God continues to be known” (1993:40).

Green (2008:62) argues that humans share a common origin with all other things, as they are also created by God. Yet, in Genesis 1:26 and 28, humanity finds an additional vocation in the form of dominion over the earth, making the human race stewards over creation. Moreover, Green asserts that humans are further distinguished from other creatures, as only humanity is created after God’s own likeness and in God’s own image (*imago Dei).* This *imago Dei* tradition has served as “the focus of diverse interpretations among Jews and Christians,” ranging from the human capacity to know God, to the attempt of identifying some physical human characteristics related to God (Green, 2008:62). The affirmation that the reality of being created in the image of God holds, as it is without a doubt “the most fundamental anthropological datum in the biblical text” (Plantinga, Thompson & Lundberg, 2010:182).

When considering the study of anthropology within theology, it is important to emphasise that one cannot limit one’s scope to isolated scriptural pronouncements such as Genesis 1:26-28,[125] and Genesis 2:7.[126] The book of Genesis also provides complementary texts, adding to the reader’s comprehensive understanding of the image of God as seen in Genesis 5:1-3 and Genesis 3. Plantinga et. al. (2010:183) argue that Genesis 3 serves as an intervening narrative to Genesis 1:26-28 and Genesis 5:1-3, including the fall into sin. Moreover, Genesis 3 serves as an indication that the image of God, in some real way survived the scars of human sin.[127]

When speaking of the ‘image of God’, as found in Genesis 1:26-28, it is important to define the term and take a closer look at the Hebrew term for ‘image’ (*tselem)* in the Old Testament.[128] *Tselem* was typically used to refer to a statue or idol, or, more

[125] Genesis 1:26–28 refers to the human person created in the image of God.
[126] Genesis 2:7 refers to the human person as a spiritual being.
[127] Psalm 8 is a biblical text which begins with a declaration of Yahweh’s majesty and the identification of human beings’ insignificance in comparison to God. It is an exalting and contributing biblical text to the high view of humanity as *Imago Dei,* as reflected in Genesis 1:26-28 and Genesis 5:1-3.
[128] Scholars argue that the word “image” stands in a relationship with the word “likeness” (d*emut*) as it serves as a synonym for “image”. “It is not a separate concept but an instance of the Hebrew penchant for poetic parallelism” (Plantinga et. al., 2010:184).

specifically, a monument erected in the likeness of an ancient near eastern king in order to claim his domain. According to this understanding, Plantinga et. al. (2010:184) provide their argument regarding humanity and the use of the word *tselem:*

> Humanity, fashioned in God's likeness, thus reflects and represents God in creation in some special royal way – declaring the earth to be God's kingdom… Human beings are God's living statues on the earth, bearing God's likeness, declaring that the "earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Ps. 24.1).

The concept of humanity standing as the *tselem* of God cannot be oversimplified, as humans uphold a vast array of ways in which they resemble God: both in activity and character (Plantinga et. al., 2010:184). The uniqueness of the human being as determined by their representation of God also involves the 'living soul' (*nèfesj*), indicating that "the source of life is dependent upon God's creative action of faithfulness" (Louw, 2000:147). It is with this in mind that it would be fitting to quote Louw's words regarding the image of God and the *nèfesj*, referring to the spiritual dimension of human existence and humanity's ultimate destiny (Louw, 2000:14)

> Both 'nèfesj' and 'image of God' thus refer to the spiritual dimension of human existence: human beings have a transcendent dimension to their existence. This dimension is decisive not only for the human person's ultimate destiny but also for conduct in general.

However, Louw (2000:147) emphasises that humanity's spiritual dimension does not exclude the body or psyche, but rather views these as vital components for the existence before God. Unfortunately, the reality of patriarchal dualism has often resulted in the denial of the flow of divine grace in and through the body by yoking divine knowledge exclusively to the soul. In light of this, modern theology's rediscovery of the body as a source of spirituality is without a doubt a liberating reality for both men and women (Thatcher, 1993:42).

The former section shed light on the destructive nature of patriarchy and its dualistic mindset, arguing that a knowledge of God involves bodiless, knowledge, and will. This argument is vetoed as knowledge of God must conclusively be holistic and involve all dimensions and levels of the human being (Thatcher, 1993:44). This emphasises the

need for a remaking of perceptions of embodiment, based on the knowledge of humanity functioning as the *tselem* of God, and embracing a rediscovery of humanity's spiritual and sexual life.

4.4 The Contemporary Significance of Body Theology?

Until recently, various Christian and Jewish believers have wrestled with the relevance of Body Theology, as a majority of Christian and Jewish writings regarding sexuality and the body seems one-directional, in the sense that they start with religion or tradition and directly apply it to the body (Nelson, 1992:42).[129] Such a one-directional approach leaves little room for a field such as Body Theology. The question of "Why Body Theology?" is undoubtedly relevant and holds the possibility of many answers as there is a spectrum of believers, feminists, and, scholars who loudly disagree on this field and its relevance (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:15). Many individuals "may [now] acknowledge the importance of the body in theology although traditionally it has been viewed as something to be overcome in order to receive the joys of heaven". However, there still exists a general paradox in the way the Christian faith holds a foundation of God's incarnation through Christ, whilst often despising or shaming the body.

Humanity is susceptible to living in extremes, rejecting the body as a whole rather than embracing a rediscovery of humanity's spirituality in the body and sexuality, and thus never reaching the platform of merrymaking.

4.5 The Body and its Delights

Modern society has for the most part been imprisoned by a patriarchal ideology. This includes the yearning of the body for desexualisation, unmaking and remaking of socially constructed body knowledge, and a language of equality. Such social constructions have often resulted in the dictation of human desire, the policing in terms of who and what to desire, and the restriction of the body's hospitality to God (Stuart, 1997:55).[130]

[129] Nelson (1992:42) criticises the fact that theological studies often fail to attempt to change direction by starting with the body and its experience and then applying it to tradition or religion.
[130] The possibility of a socially constructed desire has a chance at optimism as it means that humans are not 'naturally' lustful or exploitative, thus implying the possibility of nurturing erotic power within the self. This possibility implies that there will always be a struggle living Eros in a personal life, as well as a community (Stuart, 1997:54).

It is at this point that feminists strive to unmake and remake the old patriarchal narrative of dominant male and supressed female. Isherwood and Stuart (1998:25) make the following point regarding feminism, mutuality, and overcoming the alienation from ourselves within a patriarchal society:

> Feminist sexual practice not only requires a critique of the way that sex is used in a patriarchal society, but also needs commitment to exploring a model of mutuality between equals. We have to find ways to make mutuality sexy in order to replace the eroticisation of our domination and in so doing overcome the alienation we suffer from ourselves.

This suffering occurs when we break loose from all celebrations of embodiment, which strips humanity from the possibility of enjoying the body as a whole. The body knowledge shaped by culture and doctrine is in need of undoing as it dispenses severe psychological side effects, shaping moral and ethical understandings of the body and sexuality (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:29). According to Isherwood and Stuart, it is socially, culturally, and doctrinally shaped body knowledge that drives women to submit to societal standards, ethics, and morals, evoking the prioritisation of male sexual desire and the disposal of their own sexual expressions. Foucault challenges these structures shaped by society, culture, and doctrine when he rethinks theological discourse by asking what discourse *does,* rather than asking what it *says* (Foucault, 1978:17-38). This manner of doing lures new definitions and possibilities of theological understanding to the fore.

Foucault is of opinion that, challenging tradition and what it *says*, is of great necessity for the unmaking and remaking of the body and its theology, as it will result in freedom. This freedom is not limited to a sense of liberation, but rather manifests in a sense of resistance. Foucault elaborates on this resistance and its “strategic possibilities”:

> The resistance is to the narrow definition of self and the injustices that society imposes. However, it is also a creative process, in refusing to allow society to be comfortable with its definitions, one refuses to be an essence and becomes a ‘strategic possibility’ (Foucault quoted in Halperin 1995:75)

The application of such strategic possibilities is riddled by a number of difficulties towards the Christian tradition, and will include challenging the concept of the image of God, as well as the essence of God and her/his creation. By resisting or challenging patriarchal ideology, Foucault's (1978) theory of desexualisation in his work *The History of Sexuality* comes into play, claiming that believers need to liberate their desire and create new pleasures. Isherwood and Stuart (1998:30) view this as a philosophical activity as it "opens up new ways of being, by decentring the subject and fragmenting personal identity".

The application of Foucault's philosophical procedures of desexualisation, which will challenge tradition, is a strategic possibility that we have been yearning for. It brings to the fore the possibility of shattering the forces of detached bodily pleasures. Moreover, so called 'queer sex' opens up possibilities for the experience of the sacred and sexual self, disassociated from the commitment to reproduction,[131] thus celebrating the use of the whole body for sexual pleasure (Nelson, 1992:16). The hope for a queer future filled with pleasure is a growing reality, yet the question remains whether "an eschatological religion like Christianity" will embrace such an open future (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:31).

Nelson (1992:19) is of opinion that the dismantling of patriarchy's social structures will be followed by a psychological structure namely, 'patriotism', where women will become increasingly better equipped with powerful ideological critique of traditional patriarchy (Thatcher, 1993:7). Along this line of thinking, the possibility of the dismantling of patriarchy's social structures becomes more of a reality. Despite the knowledge of traditional patriarchy, both sexes are heeded to remember that patriarchal societies dominate, supress, and victimise both men and women (Thatcher, 1993:6). Keeping this in mind, it is paramount that both laity and scholars acknowledge Christianity as a religion of incarnation, liberation, and the setting free of captives.

Despite Christianity's unending challenges with its history of patriarchal ideology, it is a religion of enfleshment of God her/himself. Therefore, until the body is not liberated from its patriarchal ties, "creation will never understand the truly liberating power of

[131] Thomas Aquinas was of opinion that "any sexual act at all which does not aim at procreation" is wrong (cf. Thatcher, 1993:6).

incarnation," and never make the shift from body politics to Body Theology in which freedom and eroticising equality is expressed (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:32). It is because of such challenges within the Christian faith that laity and scholars must heed, in order to avoid stagnating within the societal structures of patriarchal ideology, where the body, sexual pleasure, and spiritual health is in jeopardy.

4.6 Body Theology, Feminist Theology, and Transforming Traditional Christian Theology

This section wishes to inform the reader of the method applied throughout this chapter by focusing its attention on the importance of Body Theology, while associating itself with feminist theology, desiring to understand and unmask the framework of patriarchal ideology within the traditional Christian theology. Moreover, it wishes to serve as a concluding section, tying together all loose ends throughout the chapter.

Before we descend into this sub-section, it is of importance to mention that this study wishes not to render feminist theology as the only relevant norm, but rather maintains that both feminist and Christian theology should draw norms from their overarching Christian traditions, as well as the often-overlooked experience of women. As a feminist, I cannot deny the need for a theology of equality, unmaking and remaking of patriarchal ideology, and striving for a theology that take women's experience seriously.

As mentioned in the former section(s), the Christian church and its traditions which shared in patriarchal ideology and the upkeep of a dualistic mindset has left a septic wound in humanity's understanding of the embodied self. It is due to the abusive nature of patriarchy and dualisms within Christian theology that many have decided to abandon the Christian faith. Yet others, such as feminist scholars, have decided to apply feminist tools as a main point of departure with the hope of finding liberation within the Christian tradition (Young, 2000:7).

Traditional Christian theology, based on dualistic assumptions, does not necessarily provide the needed possibility for identifying Body Theology as the way forward. Isherwood & Stuart (1998:33) writes that "until recently there has been no method available" for allowing theological valuing of bodily experience. This is mostly due to the reality that traditional Christian theology, rooted in dualistic assumptions, has

constantly highlighted the inferiority of the body, and its susceptibility to sin, in relation to the dominant preference of the mind. It is at this point that Isherwood and Stuart (1998:33) argue that, while suggesting that theology can spring from the body, we need not insinuate a bypass of reason. Rather, Isherwood and Stuart suggest that both feeling and reason are essential and need to be connected with one another. The reconnection of body, mind, and soul holds the key to seeing the glory and goodness of all of God's creation anew, as such a reconnection will attempt to break free from the cruel bondage set in place by patriarchal ideology (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:32).

Feminist theology,[132] accompanied by liberation theology, has aspired to destabilise the heart of patriarchal thinking and its "body-subordinating attitudes", by uprooting and unmaking its dualistic assumptions (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:33). Together these movements have critiqued, and tried to deconstruct, the so-called dominant power of the mind ("I think therefore I am"), which celebrates humanity's thoughts as the pinnacle of creation. This train of thought serves as proof that modern society has not yet moved beyond the pre-Christian Greek mindset.

Feminist theology, while sharing in feminist theory's task of analysing patriarchy, social structures, sexuality, and the oppression of women, accompanied by its challenges towards traditional Christian theology, has begun to uproot two stages of functionality (Young, 2000:12): The first stage critiques images and roles of women within the history of the Christian tradition, whereas the second stage focuses its attention on reconstruction. This proses of reconstruction aims to rebuild various doctrines, as most institutional church structures and their doctrines still cling to hierarchal power, directly affecting the doctrine of God.

A distorted doctrine of God is undoubtedly a dangerous doctrine to feed, as it halters acknowledgement(s) pertaining to equality, and influences language, society, sexuality, and the general structures of the church. A new understanding of church and doctrine is to be formulated, where God should rather be seen in gender-neutral terms, assisting in overcoming a distorted understanding of the relationship between

[132] Pamela Young (2000:12) argues that feminist theology draws on the broader perspectives of feminist theories and agrees on certain fundamental themes such as recognising the oppression of women and the addressing thereof. Feminist theories focus on analysing a number of areas, namely, socialisation, sexuality, reproduction, and patriarchy, after which it adds its own theoretical reflection within religious terms.

God and humanity. As mentioned earlier, this distorted relationship between God and humanity perpetuates the disconnect between body, mind, and emotions, and strips humanity of all real forms of relationship.

Isherwood and Stuart (1998:34) turn to Alfred North Whitehead's argument regarding the deconstruction of humanity's obsession with the mind and the acknowledgement of the body and soul, sharing in Whitehead's thoughts on the relationship between God and humanity. Whitehead (1938:232) argues that humanity is to be viewed as distinctively part of the creation as we are co-creators of the universe. The dominating power of the mind is thus rendered powerless as thoughts alone cannot initiate an intimate relationship amongst humanity, God, and creation (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:34).

Joël Green (2008:71) sheds an interesting light on the relationship between God and humanity by bringing an interdisciplinary requisite of the Bible, human person, and natural sciences to the table. Until now, this chapter has argued for a holistic human person (body, mind, and soul), using biblical material at its source of argument. However, both biblical material and natural sciences highlight the character of humanity nestled in their embodiment and relationality. Biblical material pushes further than the natural sciences, since it presents the physical embeddedness of the human family and highlights the vocation of humanity in relation to the cosmos. Moreover, biblical materials urge the view that a biblical theology of humanity must have as its primary point of beginning and orientation, namely the human, in a partnering relationship with God" (Green, 2008:71).

It is in the decline of the obsession with the mind that the role of the body steps to the fore, as the body is submerged in the reality of experience, which brings a new form of 'knowledge' to light. The body, serving as a mediator for experience, should not be tamed nor repressed, since it is through its explorations that new ways of loving intimately takes form (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:36). God is intimately part of the body and its experiences, encouraging humanity to invest in the body and its divine potential. Isherwood and Stuart (1998:36) write the following on God, the body, and experience:

> God unfolds in both the bodies of individuals and the cosmos creating an intimate, interdependent and co-creative trinity. Therefore, to try and remove oneself from the body by dwelling in some spiritual realm would be the greatest denial of God and divine potential

Despite God's intimate relation with humanity, the human person constantly seems to fall prey to sin and injustice, driving a wedge between God and humanity. Yet, despite humanity's constant participation in sin and injustice, liberation theology argues for a more forbearing approach, stating that sin only consists in injustices and thus cannot be "a metaphysical reality" (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:37).

It is of interest to mention that there are various ranges of liberation theologies, all using the same method with the hope of addressing the multiple arrays of injustice and oppression created by people (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:38). In the midst of addressing the multiple arrays of injustice and oppression lies the universal love of God, encouraging experience and challenging the hierarchy which the church has so guiltlessly fostered.

Feminist theology aligns with liberation theology, sharing in the undoing of hierarchy, and promoting *experience* as the heart of theology. Isherwood and Stuart (1998:39) are of opinion that all individual experiences share in the heart of religion and theology. Feminist theology thus takes the whole person seriously as it strives to challenge overemphasised rationality and dualism, by acknowledging that humans exist of embodied feelings as well as rationality.

4.7 Conclusion

Despite our modern society, humanity still holds the notion that sex is an inferior notion, a notion in which God can have no part. In this chapter, it is shown how Body Theology strives to break free from these thoughts and notions, arguing for Gods full participation in sex as the body as a whole should be viewed as a source of sexual pleasure in need of acceptance.

If God is to be known through sex, bodiliness and human relations, then humanity needs to acknowledge the embodiment of the human flesh (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:45). Nelson argues that Gods embodiment in every human person calls for accountability in the manner in which humans treat each other (Isherwood & Stuart,

1998:46). Christians are thus encouraged to never devalue the reality of the holistic human person as the "body has become a site of serious theological reflection and ongoing revelation." (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:51). The implications of valuing the body and its experiences should not be underestimated as it shares in liberation-and-feminist theology's question of deconstructing centuries of patriarchal ideology, dualism and injustice as should in the small town of Beaufort West. In the end, Christianity has undergone centuries of constantly shifting relationships with the body.

There is an often-repeated generalisation that ancient Judaism held a positive attitude towards the body as mentioned in a former sub-section. Ancient Judaism seemed to regard human beings as unitary while arguing that sexuality was an essential part of being human, as well as a God given gift. It is at this point that a book such as the Song of Songs offers insight into the glorious celebration of human bodiliness, sexuality and desire. Isherwood and Stuart are of opinion that the Hebrew Scriptures has come to presenting its readers with a relationship of equality with God's presence in its midst (1998:53). There are scholars who argue that God's presence is identifiable in the passion between the lovers, found in the closing section of the book of Song of Songs. (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:53)

The ambiguity of the lovers' erotic love also holds the authority to inform readers that ancient Judaism is not completely free from problematic body relationships. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel's body politics are interwoven with social and religious structures provoking anxieties regarding the body and its holiness factor. It is due to such bodily ambiguity in the Old Testament that this thesis will turn to the Song of Songs with the hope of gathering further insight into the relationship between the human person, the body and its experiences. On linguistic grounds it is of interest to mention that humanity's idea of simply piling up all Scriptural references on the "body" and "soul" with the hope of deducing a biblical understanding of the human person is without a doubt a misguided linguistic attempt. Believers must face the reality that "neither the Old nor the New Testament writers developed a specialised or technical, denotative vocabulary for theoretical discussions of the human person." (Green, 2008:60). If it is as Green wrote, then believers and contemporary interpreters should exercise great care when reading biblical materials "in light of specialised language that has developed subsequently." (Green, 2008:60)

In the subsequent chapter, Body Theology will be brought into conversation with the various themes found throughout the Song of Songs specifically in the four *Wasf* poems (Song 4:1-5, 5:10-16, 6:4-7, and 7:1-10). Throughout Chapter 5, the emphasis will fall on the body and the way a rereading of the Song of Songs in terms of Body Theology may be helpful to men and women as to regain a sense of wholeness of their bodyselves.

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Chapter 5

Body Theology and the Song's *Wasf* Poems

Let us get up early to the vineyards; Let us see if the vine has budded, whether the grape blossoms are open, and the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love. The Mandrakes give off a fragrance, and at our gates are pleasant fruits, all manner, new and old, which I have laid up for you, my beloved.

(Song of Songs 7:12-13)

5.1 Introduction

The former chapters, and particularly Chapter 3 of this study, shed light on the hermeneutical problem of the Song of Songs, challenging traditional views on the Song's authorship, dating, interpretation, and message. This journey has highlighted the fact that the Song is known as one of the greatest examples of an ambiguous biblical text, since a vast majority of its content has, in one way or another, been tentatively or hypothetically altered by traditional reuse (LaCocque, 1998:2).

A central aspect of the Song of Song is the intimate dialogue between two lovers who encounter each other's bodies, longing, yearning, and desiring for the other's flesh. It is in the seductive dialogue of these two lovers, that readers are invited to gaze upon and even share in their longing and celebration of each other's bodies. This longing and celebration is facilitated through cryptic and explicit caressing found in language laden with metaphors and vivid lyrics. Black (2009:2) emphasises the Song's seductive content by arguing that its body imagery, and propensity to tease and confound readers, is to be viewed as the subject of the book.

This current chapter will focus its attention on the four *wasf* poems within the Song of Songs, namely Song 4:1-5, 5:10-16, 6:4-7, and 7:1-10. A hermeneutical lens of Body Theology will be appropriated in order to demonstrate how these poems speak about sex, sexuality, gender, and desire. These four poems portray the lovers exploring a symphony of eroticism regarding each other's bodies-both beautiful and grotesque. At its best, the four *wasf* poems can be viewed as playful, subjects of teasing, and, at times, even comical. At its worst, the four w*asf* poems hold the power to portray the

body in a ridiculous manner, capable of unsettling and estranging the reader (Black, 2008:2). Fiona Black and Roland Boer will be important conversation partners within this chapter.

5.2 Interpreting the *Wasf* Songs

The Song of Songs is a book with much to reflect on, as it entices readers with its beauty, longings for intimacy and knowledge, refusals of ownership, and demands to possess. The Song's textual corpus houses two lovers' behaviour, voices, and provocative descriptions of each other's physical bodies. The Song is filled with perplexing and vibrant imagery, providing no plot[133] or story, but rather a series of encounters expressed through the wishes and sighs of lyrical language. Black (2000:303) beautifully describes the Song as never static, but rather chaotic and teeming, ever alive with intercourse and passion for both the reader and the lovers who depict it.

The Song is filled with the two lovers' references to each other's bodies, yet, amidst all the metaphors, similes and hyperboles, lie four concentrated descriptions of both the female and male body. Scholars refer to these four texts as the *wasf* texts, and identify them as Song 4:1-5,[134] Song 5:10-16,[135] Song 6:4-7, and Song 7:1-10 (Black, 2009:2). Meyers (2013:142) identifies the *wasf* as a "descriptive song" – a poem describing the female and male body by the use of metaphors and a series of images. Brenner (2005:167) differs from Meyers by arguing that the traditional view of the w*asfs* concentrates on the female beauty rather than its male counterpart.[136] Brenner underplays the importance of the body of the male counterpart due to the lover's less active appearance in the Song.

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[133] The quest to find a plot in the Song incorporates the consideration of textual unity and integrity, which provide readers with the encounter of a unified plot movement. The attempts to find the Song's plot brings a plurality of voices, backgrounds, voices, and preconceptions to the fore (Brenner, 1993:269). Chapter 3 provides further insight into this matter.

[134] The reader finds the man describing the woman from head to chest, as can be seen in Song 6:4-7 (Black, 2009:21).

[135] In Song 5:10-16 and 7:1-10 the full body discussion (from head to toe, and then from toe to head) appears, yet not all parts are depicted.

[136] In a separate writing, Meyers (1993:201) does acknowledge that the female body is more frequently depicted, as three of the four *wasfs* in the Song describe the female body and only one describes the male body. This may mean that the poet had limited opportunity to indulge in architectural imagery when portraying the man. Yet, there is also the possibility of a second poet, as the architectural language of the man is strikingly different from that of the woman as it is the female voice that defines the male architecture.

The Song's body imagery can be problematic for two interrelated reasons: the first is the odd nature of the images, which often drives readers and interpreters to go to considerable lengths in order to make sense of what is being read. The second is the itemisation and objectification of the oddly looking body in the Song, which creates a potential conflict between readers' expectations of love poetry and the context in which the body descriptions are situated (Black, 2009:10). Interpretation history provides insight into biblical scholars' anxiety considering the indeterminate imagery applied to the body and romance (Black, 2009:20).

The study of the so-called sensual content of the Song of Songs, where it is read in literal terms, brings new challenges to the fore with respect to its descriptive language. Such a reading will have to break free from the theological and allegorical treatise, as well as the reading of the Song as a secular love poem.

> More recent work on the Song shows critics attempting to account for imagery not by explicating cryptic metaphors, but by proposing new, less-literal ways of reading the images, for example, as evocative, rather than descriptive (Black, 2009:24).

Yet, the question remains: What happens when one reads the Song of Songs through the lens of Body Theology?

The work and interpretations of modern biblical critics appear incongruent as they often claim a certain objectivity by avoiding the role of reading the Song through any other lens but allegorically. By allowing the Song's body into the interpretive spectrum, while acknowledging its erotic context, the Song's so-called "wild images" seem to wreak havoc in the world of the reader (Black, 2009:29).

Although the term *wasf* is currently used for the descriptions of the body, it finds its origin in the ancient Near Eastern world's marriage and wooing rites. The involvement of the *wasfs* in marriage rites would play itself out in the bridegroom singing the praises of his bride, emphasising her beauty and describing her body parts. The *wasfs* were used due to their contextual and structural resemblance of love poems in Arabic literature. Yet, the form of the w*asf* cannot truly be restricted to Arabic literature, as its

presence has been traced back to Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Ugaritic literature (Black, 2009:21).[137]

The exploration of the w*asf* reveals an effort to locate the song's "real use" as erotic poetry, as well as to identity some of the Song's formal characteristics. Black (2000:306) adds that the w*asf* term has served in aiding the shift of scholarly approaches from heavy allergisation to a more literal reading. The *wasf* also portrays an odd combination of natural and urban elements imposed on the body, which causes confusion and even unease. However, the texts also take on an unsettling quality, portraying the body in a ridiculous manner, which causes conflict and even alienation. At its best, the images within the text are comical, playful, and even the subject of teasing (Black, 2009:2). Black's reference to natural and urban elements is not limited to the w*asf* texts. Throughout the Song, the elements of "rural", "urban", "fair", and "dark" are placed in textual relations with one another. The plurality of voices and variety in tone and mood, directly influence the variety of lover figurations found throughout the Song (Brenner, 1993:269).

The Song's celebration of human love and body imagery is inherently a matter of gender, as gender deals with the explicit depiction of female and male attributes. As mentioned earlier, the female body is more frequently described and depicted than its male counterpart. Apart from the depiction of the male body in Song 5:10-16, other male images are briefly found throughout the Song (Black, 2009:49). Feminist readers of the Song should heed against an overexcitement over the dominant female voice in the Song,[138] as female critics have often neglected to notice that, although the male voice does not feature as much, it is filled with objectification and itemisation of the female body. The objectification, ridicule, and unflattering depictions of the female body, echo significant issues of gender construction and equality within the Song. Black (2009:50) adds that the w*asf* texts are in dire need of feminist readings, as both female and male figures are objectified. Such feminist readings would allow for the exploration of form, reader's involvement, author's intent, imagery, points of view, and gender differentials.

[137] As is discussed in Chapter 3.
[138] Such scholars usually argue that it as a sign of female superiority or equality (Black, 2009:49).

The *wasfs*, literally meaning/description' in Arabic, provide the most obvious material for the consideration of gender imagery (Meyers, 1993:199), which would include the concern for the gender of the objects used in the metaphorical figures. Meyers (1993:200) argues that the poet most likely drew her/his images from a wide spectrum of semantic fields, in order to indicate various aspects of the female and male body, their attractiveness, and behaviour. The Song's use of natural images, such as honey (Song 4:11; 5:1), milk (Song 4:11; 5:1, 12), flora, fauna, gardens (Song 4:12, 16; 5:1; 6:2, 8:13), vineyards (Song 1:6; 2:15; 7:12, 13; 8:11), and so forth, are generally neutral, except for vineyards and gardens, which reflect female nuances of sexuality. The descriptions also include images from settings other than the natural world, such as architectural images, which Meyers (1993:201) identifies as offering "better potential for dealing with gender than do those supplied by nature". The flora, fauna, and human bodies in the *wasfs* are in a lesser sense "citations of erogenous zones, or the erotic descriptions of sexual bodies, but rather an evocation of grotesque bodies" (Boer, 2000:292).

Despite the extraordinary literary quality of the Song's poetry, which bespeaks the talents of educated poets, the Song's love genre seems to transcend social classes as it reflects everyday language which permeates social settings. According to Meyers (1993:210), the Song permeates social patriarchal rules by creating a "love-world" dependant on both females and males. Moreover, Meyers argues that the Song is set apart from public and institutional life, revealing a balance between male and female life.[139] The Song's domestic setting provides the needed space for the mutual intimacy of the female-male relationship, providing a sustained sense of gender mutuality, despite the dominant female appraisals (Meyers, 1993:211). Meyers (1993:212) opts for a construction of love and gender which is free from social, cultural, and power constraints in the w*asf* texts, as the domestic realm provides the ideal setting for it.

However, scholars such as R. N. Soulen (1993:214-224) do not share in Meyers' sentiment of gender equality within the Song. Apart from negating the importance of the female voice, scholars such Soulen (1993:214-224) insist on a male author, interpreting the poet as masculine. Yet, when faced with the description of male beauty

[139] It is of interest to mention that, in pre-modern societies, the domestic realm was acknowledged as the female realm. See Meyers (1993:211) for further information on the female role in the domestic realm.

(Song 5:10-16), he assumes that the passages were written by a woman,but dismisses them due to their female inferiority (Falk, 1993:232). Falk (1993:233) ascribes Soulen's attitude towards the text as deriving from culture-bound prejudices, which are "incompatible with the cultural sensibility that created the Song", and deems such interpretations as sexist:

> Sexist interpretation of the wasf, and of the Song in general, is a striking example of how the text can be distorted by culturally biased readings. To interpret the Song authentically, we must shed the cultural blinders that make what is foreign seem strange.

In response to Falk's argument, it is clear that an authentic interpretation of the Song has the power to teach its readers something new about how to redeem love and sexuality in a fallen world. This being said, the interpretation of the complex w*asf* texts and images has proven to be problematic throughout reception history.[140] There is no doubt that the Song's images are difficult to explain and often conflicted with scholarly interests. Yet, there is one element to be agreed upon, namely the Song's grotesque imagery.[141] Black (2009:3) argues that the grotesque devilishly plays with the readers' textual encounters, describing various peculiar images that shock and confront. "In addition, it gives some insight into the duplicitous nature of the text – itself a signifier of desire – and the ambivalence of readerly reactions to it."

Grotesquery immerses the reader in playfulness, danger, and unpredictability – all of which make the grotesque so appealing for the Song's description (Black, 2009:4). Apart from the Song's inclusion of images of architectural structures and items from nature, such as fauna and flora, the referral to food, such as milk (Song 4:11; 5:1, 2), honey (Song 4:11; 5:1), nectar (Song 4:11), and pomegranate juice (Song 8:2), when read from an allegorical interpretation, serves as a very wet list of sex and bodily fluids. These bodily fluids are not merely lubricant from the female vagina or male come, but also female mucus, milk, ejaculate, sweat, urine, tears, blood, menstrual floods, saliva, and faeces. This implies that the Song itself has broken free from the constraints of

[140] As can be seen in the Chapter 3 of this study.
[141] The term grotesque was coined in the Renaissance to describe and refer to a style of art which playfully incorporated human and animal bodies into various decorative designs. Since then, the word has metamorphosed into fantastic hybrids of art. More recently, the meaning has been adapted in such a manner, that it now expresses the "estranged and alienated world", exhibiting attempts to "control or exorcise its demonic elements" (Black, 2009:3).

dry readings and has become oozing, slippery, and spraying, introducing its readers to the grotesquery of the human body (Boer, 2000:291).

5.3 The *Wasf* Songs and its Grotesque Bodies

The grotesque body to which Black (2000:310) refers, is a body in process: never complete and doing what bodies naturally do, namely, eating, dying, excreting, giving birth, and so forth. The body is thus always in "the act". The grotesque is inseparable from the human body and reality, conjuring emotions such as fear, disgust, and loathing, whilst affecting humanity's psyches, comfort, and desires.

As previously noted, three of the four w*asf* texts provide detailed body descriptions of the female body, creating a picture of an odd-looking, ill-proportioned woman with hair as a flock of goats, teeth like sheep, and eyes like doves. The Song's odd display of the female body holds the power to portray the female body's closeness with the grotesque based on its physiology. The volatility of the female body seems to provide ample material for it to serve as the target of grotesque figurations as mentioned by Boer (2000:291-292). Black (2000:313) speculates that it is through the grotesque figurations that the "female physiology and reproductivity are inextricably linked with sin, death, and eternal damnation".

It is at the wrestling with the Song's portrayal of the woman's body, and the reality of the grotesque, that one should ask whether there is any connection between the two. The question can only be answered by addressing the manner in which the texts are read and approached, including the exploration of methodologies, such as allegorical readings,[142] literal readings,[143] romanticising the text,[144] reading in context,[145] and

[142] Chapter 3 of this study provides a clear description of allegorical reading and the usage thereof.
[143] This implies the interpretation of the text as it is, for example, the comparison of the woman to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots is most likely playful, capturing the woman's "exotic" and "ornamented splendour" (Black, 2009:30).
[144] Romanticising the text implies that readers take the Song's context of erotic and love poetry as key factor for interpretations of the Song's imagery (Black, 2009:32).
[145] This form of reading advocates a system of interpretation that starts by looking at the Song, and then the greater context of the Hebrew Bible, in order to contextualise the imagery (Black, 2009:42). Black adds that the expansion of cultural contexts holds the possibility to elucidate the Song's images, expanding the interpretive options.

'evocative'[146] and pornographic reading.[147] This is important, since the manner of reading determines the reader's findings, outcomes, and experience of the text. All responses to the text (scholarly and lay) assume a certain perspective on the Song, as there seems to be something quite personal in readers' preoccupation with the images (Black, 2009:62). Brenner (2005:167) contributes to Black's findings by stating that it is possible to radically alter the *wasfs* meaning and response through minimal transmutations, such as an additional angle or a transition in mood signifying criticism of a social or literal convention.

This study will follow in Black's (2009:129) scholarly footsteps by appropriating a literal reading of the texts,[148] recognising that the Song's descriptive language is comprised of metaphors and similes as figures of speech, and aimed at responding to complex language focused on the body in "love poetry". The appropriation of a literal reading of the texts is not as rigid as it might seem, seeing that decisions about genre (the *wasf* texts) influence the manner in which these poetic texts are read and connected to specific settings. Similarly, poetic decisions about the Song's context (such as pastoral settings), "the relationship of the characters (two lovers, perhaps even beset by difficulties), etc., have affected readers' decisions about the overall shape of the book and how it is to be understood" (Black, 2009:129).

Black (2008:62-63) emphasises that the reading of the Song is far more than an attempt at an objective or intellectual enquiry into the meaning of the Song's cryptic imagery:

> Yet the relationship between readers and bodies in the Song is not an easy one. It is not a matter of 'interpreting away' the odd images, so that the poems make sense. For it seems that subsequent generations of commentators express the same fascination with the images and the same compulsion to understand them rationally.

[146] Black (2009:42), in reference to "evocative reading", argues that it is not the parallel of the ancient Near Eastern culture, or the Song's eroticism which aids in the addressing of the Song's problem of imagery. "Rather, it is the manner of reading that is important. This marks an important shift from the work that has been considered so far, and it is a shift that opens up the interpretive possibilities for the images even more."

[147] See Boer (2000:276-301) for a discussion of the pornographic reading of the Song of Songs.

[148] See Black (2009:128) for further insight into the literal reading of the figurative language describing the bodies in the Song of Songs.

It is thus clear that general remarks regarding the Song's sometimes unattractive and unappealing images, communicate a degree of readerly discomfort.

The Song's bodies are not presented in an egotistic form or in a private essence, severed from the other spheres of life. Rather, they are portrayed as something universal and representative of all people. The grotesque body does not succumb to biological individualism or the bourgeois ego as it exists in all people, who are continuously growing and being renewed. Due to the prevailing Renaissance view of the body, which was shaped by the "aesthetics of beautiful", the modern and contemporary understanding of the body does not share in the aesthetic of the grotesque realism which has also engendered the grotesque body. According to these aesthetic standards, the grotesque body represents the hideous, ugly, unappealing, and formless and is generally downplayed and marginalised (Black, 2009:90-91).

> The grotesque body achieves its cosmic proportions not because it makes only a total human engagement, but because it merges with all the world's elements, encountering and merging with the earth (Black, 2009:95).

It is of interest to mention that the grotesque is not just a matter of physicality but is also psychological. This can be referred to as the inner aspect of the grotesque, which offers understanding into the emotional sphere, so that the grotesque body and its readers may be better understood (Black, 2009:103). The grotesque bodies in the Song are also variable. At times, the poet makes them vanish, where, at other times, their presence is most desired.

The grotesquery of the Song (both textual and in the bodies it displays), directly affects its readers as it provokes disgust and even laughter, sustaining the reader's interest in the Song. As Black (2000:322) writes "Readers are compelled by certain features, and repelled by others". This repulsion and compulsion drives one to ask whether there is any biblical aesthetic for the human form against which the Song's bodies and grotesque imagery can be evaluated (Black, 2009:123). Black (2009:124) proposes that readers should not over-simplify the bodies' grotesque labels and imagery, but rather embark on an enquiry into dissonance. The Song's bodies should thus not be compared to other bodies, as a heuristic reading is to be encouraged, "privileging the unexpected, variability and difference" (Black, 2009:124).

The grotesque bodies in the Song of Songs thus provide readers with a new way of looking at bizarre images, interpreting them in a way that meets with their idealistic and romantic sensibilities, yet challenges them. In totality, the Song's images co-exist as they are part of a larger work, presenting the 'story' of two lovers seeking unification. Black (2009:317) identifies the grotesque in the Song of Songs as more than a mere label for imagery, since it has significant implications for the interpretation of the book as a whole. The difference between the two bodies is key in the appropriation of the interpretation of the book and its texts.

5.4 The *Wasf* Songs and its Notion of Beauty and the Grotesque

The former section shed light on the *wasf* songs/texts/poems and the grotesque bodies contained in them, emphasising the unavoidable presence of the grotesque in both the Song and human life, which has the potential to challenge readers to new ways of viewing bizarre images, and re-evaluate traditional understandings of beauty.

The current section strives to appropriate the above findings by embarking on a journey of exegetical exploration of the four w*asf* texts and their various themes. Before embarking on such a journey, readers are encouraged to remember the difficulty in identifying authorial intentions for the poem's descriptive words of the lovers and their bodies, as authors cannot control the interpretation of their readers. The section will thus start by briefly discussing the notion of 'beauty' in the Song of Songs.

5.4.1 The Notion of 'Beauty' in the Song

The topic of 'beauty' has served as a central point in the world of art and aesthetics (most dominantly in the Western World), yet, at the end of the nineteenth century, the seemingly natural alliance between 'beauty' and the female subject began to dissolve. The twentieth century's elite art and understanding of 'beauty' have recently begun to unravel due to a history of resistance, which resists female subjects as a symbol of 'beauty'. This resistance has had many consequences which affect contemporary ways of understanding domesticity, communication, pleasure, love, and gender relations (Dobbs-Allsopp, 2005:264). It is this very resistance which constantly affects the themes of love, vulnerability, and absence in the Song and its *wasf* texts.

Like other cultural values, the notion of ‘beauty’ can and has been abused throughout the centuries. Yet, scholars such as Dobbs-Allsopp (2005:261) argues that humanity holds the capacity to counter such abuse, as all concepts of ‘beauty’ are culturally and historically constructed and, therefore, not predetermined. The constructions of ‘beauty’ are thus not static, but ever changing and malleable. ‘Beauty’, like wine and fruit, comes in different forms and varieties, providing various multiplicities of delight – each to its own appeal.

The ever-changing nature of ‘beauty’ is interwoven with all human bodies, as all humans are embodied beings and biological creatures, consisting of their own peculiar mix of DNA, bone structure, body, fat, skin colour, shape, taste, and smell. Scholars are encouraged to be mindful of the harm which has been inflicted in the name of ‘beauty’. The Song of Songs provides ample examples of the real, bodily risks involved when considering ‘beauty’, for example, in Song 5:7 the woman searches for her beloved (as seen in Song 5:10), but is found by the night watch, who strips and violently beats her. Dobbs-Allsopp (2005:261) makes use of this very example to portray the risks of encountering ‘beauty’, as beauty is filled with dangerous perils. In applying an allegorical lens, Dobbs-Allsopp aims to warn readers of the dangers of ‘beauty’, since there are no safe or risk-free means of encountering ‘beauty’.

‘Beauty’ in its own right is thus filled with elements of grotesqueness, as both ‘beauty’ and the grotesque focus on the body’s biological factors such as shape, body fat, taste, skin colour, and smell to define their meaning. The notion of ‘beauty’ and the grotesque are thus defined by the eye of the beholder. Francis Landy (2011:135) refers to the dangers of beauty and the ugliness it so secretively houses:

> Because humans project their emotions onto the source of arousal, the destructive, sadistic impulses evoked by Beauty are attributed to Beauty itself. It is Beauty that causes people to ‘lose their heads’, and is responsible for dangerous explosions of irrational feeling. This is especially pernicious in misogynistic discourse, in which the beautiful woman becomes the bad woman, the temptress, mingling polarities of adoration, fear, and fascinated contempt.

Ugliness is thus not far from beauty, as aesthetic values are extraordinary volatile. Landy (2011:135) argues that ugliness/grotesqueness is the rejection of the

subconscious form-elements hidden by beauty, as beauty in itself can be terrifying. Moreover, desire in itself is terrifying, as it shares in the same mystery as death. Humanity is fatefully attracted to the element of fear and mystery as humans seek their ultimate answers in it.

By exploring the implications of readerly desire, beauty and grotesquery, it becomes clear that the lovers' yearning, loss, and excitement become that of the readers, as the Song coaxes and lures its readers through various devices such as images, the Song's struggle with the lack of a plot, and the theme of eroticism. Scholars such as Black (2000:321) believe that the Song's lack of plot is not problematic, as it seems to encourage readers to impose themselves upon the Song. The reader's quest in finding a plot for the Song involves keeping track of the lovers' fluctuating relationship, where they are sometimes united and at other times facing obstacles. Readers have to keep track of who is speaking and who is looking for whom. The readers thus become intimately bound to the texts and lovers' quest to be united.

The beauty within in the Song is therefore ambiguous, as it breeds ambivalence among the readers and lovers. In light of such inconsistency, the grotesque seems to play a key role in the life of the lovers. Instead of existing in a utopia where no foxes, watchmen, and brothers have an impact on happiness and love, the lovers find themselves in a world with complications, which are constantly in need of further exploration. Black (2009:191) suggest two possibilities regarding the lover's statements of beauty. The first possibility is the lover being intentionally ironic in calling his beloved beautiful, as the lover holds the power of hurting his beloved by focusing on the very issues and features which he knows make her feel inadequate and uncomfortable (Brenner, 1993:276).

The second possibility is the genuineness of the man's statements as he truly sees his beloved as beautiful. Yet there is a disjunction, a cognitive dissonance, implying a more complicated attraction than the reader observes. "The descriptions betray his unconscious, which is threatened by the woman whom he loves" (Black, 2009:191).[149]

[149] The man's unconsciousness could be threatened by several of the woman's aspects, such as her sexual aggressiveness or her autonomy. "He might interrupt her seeking, her calling, and her perpetually active voice with 'poems' about her body that bear witness to his overwhelming discomfort that a woman should behave thus" (Black, 2009:191).

The woman shares in the man's descriptive possibilities, yet there are some dissimilarities such as the woman's target audience being other woman rather than her beloved, separating her from the male statements.[150] The woman's statement of the man's body provides two possibilities, of which the first argues that the woman would not be assisting the daughters of Jerusalem in their search, but rather provides a competitive statement: the woman's lover is phallically proficient and well-built, yet if the images reveal the woman's unconscious desires and fears, "the considerable emphasis on the phallic is suggestive" (Black, 2009:191).

Just as with the man, the woman's unconscious registration plays a role as it holds the possibility of serving as a registration of her sexual desire in her lover's portrait. The second possibility is that the woman's depiction of the man serves as evidence of her own unease and fears as she could be threatened by his remoteness, "or even be reminded of an experience of physical assault that she suffered at the hands of the others (Song 5.7)" (Black, 2009:192).[151] The information thus suggests that the Song's grotesque bodies introduce a variety of implications for both the lovers' relationship and the Song's portrayal of love.[152]

It is with such notions of 'beauty' and the grotesque in mind, that the Song's four *wasf* texts will be approached with a combined literal and figurative reading, unveiling the Song's erotic content, which serves as a stepping-stone in the exegetical exploration of its interpretive options. The first of the images to provide insight into the grotesque figurations, is Song 4:1-5, followed by Song 5:10-16, where the woman provides her own sensual description of her male lover. In Song 7:1-10, the *wasf* breaks the familiar pattern of starting with the woman's head, working downwards and ending with her breasts. It is of interest to mention that all of the w*asf* images stop with the object of

[150] Black (2009:191) is of opinion that the man most likely does not even hear the woman's rendering of his body.
[151] This approach is riddled with doubt, yet needs to be addressed as it still serves as a possible reading of the scene. An exegesis of Song 5:7 provides no direct evidence of sexual violence in the text, yet scholars still debate the seriousness of the stripping of the woman's mantle (Longman, 2001:169; Pope, 1977:527; Black, 2009:192). The possibility of sexual violence will thus only be considered if in fact the woman was truly stripped and exposed. The woman's jubilant spirit in which the poem seems to be written, serves as a counter argument to the possibility of rape. The woman's conclusion of the man's desirability threatens this reading as it rather seems as if the woman is aroused by the lover's body (Black, 2009:192).
[152] The lovers' emotional inconsistency and grotesque bodies undoubtedly serve as key issues in the Song (Black, 2009:192).

the speaker's sensuous attention, mainly the woman's breasts. Further exegetical insights on the four w*asf* texts will follow.

5.4.2 Song 4:1-7 – "How Beautiful You Are, My Love"

5.4.2.1 Song 4:1-3

The first of the *wasf* texts to be discussed is Song 4:1-7, a poem solely devoted to describing the woman's body. This section contains clear boundaries shaped by the poem's internal structure, describing the woman's beauty in detail (Song 4:1a), starting with his admiration of her eyes (Song 4:1b), praising her hair (Song 4:1c), complimenting her teeth (Song 4:2), relishing in her lips and mouth (Song 4:3a), delighting in her cheeks (Song 4:3b), loving her neck (Song 4:4), and fawning over her breasts (Song 4:5) (Keck, 1997:402). The woman's beauty is thus the perfect kind of beauty, drawing him closer to her, as can be seen in Song 4:6-8.

The opening and closing couplets of the poem form an inclusion which expresses the poem's sole preoccupation, namely the woman's 'beauty'. In Song 4:1a, the participle *hinnēh* creates the impression of something unexpected, like the startling appearance of something very beautiful (Dobbs-Allsopp, 2005:261), which leads to the main part of the poem where the female body is praised. Assis (2009:122) further identifies this main part as the man's devotion to praise and specify every detail of the woman's body, portraying his great admiration of gazing at her until he is familiar with every detail of her body. Assis goes so far as to write that the purpose of the man's description is to arouse desire in the woman.

At first glance, the poem reveals a series of hybridised forms, portraying the woman through an assortment of natural and human-made elements. As Black describes this portrayal: "Imposed on her body are fruits and animals along with the physical lines of the land and its marks of human habitation and destruction" (Black, 2009:130). On the woman's body, animals are herded (Song 4:1-2), fed, and might even hunt for themselves. On the same body, structures are built, which serve to both decorate her and aid her in defence. At times, the semantic range of words used in the poem, presents readers with various other grotesque options for interpretation.[153]

[153] A fitting example would be the noun used for the woman's lips (שפה), which can also be translated as 'edge', as in the 'edge' of a river bank or a sea shore. In short, these translations are territory markers

Unlike most scholars, Boer joins Black's affirmation of the Song's grotesqueness as both scholars are not restricted by traditional viewings. Boer (2000:295) argues that the poems do not just describe the female body, but also serve as *wasfs* for drag queens. The suspected flattering of the woman therefore holds the possibility of serving as ridicule, or, even worse, as repulsion of the female body, indicating something of the lover's possible unease about the woman's body and her sexuality (Black, 2000:318). Garrett (1993:404) argues that the male lover is not so much describing the woman's body or providing associative *wasfs* for drag queens[154] but is rather describing his feelings when gazing upon the woman. This approach holds that an aspect of the woman's body, beauty, and grotesqueness provokes profound emotional responses, while highlighting various themes within the Song. These themes include 'gazing', 'vulnerability', 'desire', and 'absence'.

Longman (2001:143) identifies the theme of 'desire' as being present in the first verse of Song 4, arguing that the first seven Hebrew words are identical to the words of Song of Songs 1:15. However, the last phrase, "behind your veil", is an additional, significant phrase. Its significance lies in the fact that the "veil both hides beauty and heightens desire" as the glimpse of physical desire is more alluring then seeing the whole.[155] The concept of the veil seems to be problematic in itself, leaving behind a trail of unanswered questions due to the lack of historical knowledge.[156] The veil heightens the woman's mystery as both readers and the lover wish to look behind it. It is in the mystery of the woman and her veil that the notion of the "invisible gaze" comes into play. A gaze, more powerful than a fleeting glance as it is steadfast and intense, unnerves the observed subject and robs them from their capacity for speech.[157] Myers (2003:143) argues that the male lover's constant praise and observation of the

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in need of defence, "and in whose interest blood is sometimes spilt" (Black, 2009:135). According to Black, the reference to the woman's mouth (מדכר) also serves as a pun, as the noun also means wilderness or desert.

[154] Garrett insinuates that the text provides no room for allegorical or figurative interpretations, literal interpretation is the only form of interpretation. The text also does not provide room for homosexual, transsexual or intersexual interpretation. The text, its descriptions and literal interpretation implies a heterosexual reading (1993:404).

[155] As explained in the sub-section on desire in the first chapter, desire is seldom about the succeeded end result, but rather about the journey to the end result.

[156] See Longman (2008:144-145) for an in-depth discussion of the scholarly problem of the veil.

[157] Myers (2003:140) argues that all subjects of observation holsters the ability to articulate their thoughts and emotions, yet when gazed upon they are forced to break the gaze in order to find their voice. "Like a magnetic bond, you must first sever the imperceptible connection between self and other to recuperate yourself back to yourself" (Myers, 2003:140).

woman's physical form (the woman's hair, eyes, teeth, cheeks, lips, neck, and breasts), implies that their gazes have not yet crossed, since the male lover has not yet fallen silent.[158]

The male lover's erotic gaze leaves him speechless as it is revelatory of a profound truth: "desire for the other in his/her alterity can never be sated; it is consuming" (Myers, 2003:144). This emphasises the presence of vulnerability in erotica. The man's revealing gaze on the woman's hybridised forms, integrating the architectural and natural world, clearly portrays the woman as inextricably connected with nature, which is also found in the woman's self-identification in Song 2:1.[159]

Four of the natural images found in the third verse explicitly mention movement – either natural and wild (gazelles, doves), or controlled and domesticated (goats, sheep) – while the fifth image (the pomegranates), suggests a by-product of the domestication of nature (Black, 2009:131). The movement created by the interdependence of the human form and the natural world is a movement reflecting deeds such as killing, eating, and hunting, emphasising the general cycles of life. Readers are thus encouraged not to solely focus on the woman's alignment with the natural world, but to consider the reference to architectural and military connections as important attributing elements in the understanding of the Song's grotesqueness.

5.4.2.2 Song 4:4

The word order of Song 4:3 seems to continue over to Song 4:4, leading to a comparison. The simile, a neck like the "tower of David", seems at first very unflattering to the modern and contemporary reader. The unflattering reality of this comparison has resulted in it being quite an interpretive challenge for scholars, leading some to interpret it as a transfer of value rather than a visual correspondence (Longman, 2001:146).

According to Longman (2001:146), there are those who view the tower image as suggestive of the woman's imperviousness, providing scholars with sub-themes such

[158] Myers (2003:144) believes that the erotic gaze between the lovers can shatter the other's subjectivity while consuming their very being. It would seem as if the one is fearful of speaking, from the fear that it might cause the other to disappear forever, and that a part of the one's soul which has been consumed, will dissipate like ash in the wind.
[159] The woman's hybridised forms will reflect recurring architectural and natural images throughout the rest of the Song.

as absence and vulnerability. Although the exact appearance and location of the tower of David is unknown, the poet manages to furnish the comparison with several descriptive aspects. At first, the tower appears to be built with a very particular architectural feature (לְתַלְפִּיּוֹת stemming from the root of the feminine noun תַּלְפִּיּוֹת), a word often translated as "course, weaponry, built in layers" (Black, 2009:131; Longman, 2001:146; Garrett, 1993:405). Black (2009:131) identifies the word as a *hapax*, a term with various interpretation possibilities, ranging from a proper name (LXX), to masonry arranged in rows, or even weapons. The true existence of the tower is unknown, yet King David's association with it lends a sense of power and dignity to the image, creating a fitting space for the pervasive use of military equipment (שְׁלָטֵי stemming from the root of the masculine noun שְׁלָטִים) (Garrett, 1993:405).

The male lover furthers the comparison by noting the "shields of the warriors" hanging around the woman's neck. This comparison is typically read as a metaphor for jewellery, yet from a literal reading, it serves as a constant reminder of victories in battles, or even the prowess of the king's soldiers (Black, 2009:131).[160] The image also provides readers with the opportunity to explore some of the strategies of the grotesque, such as the juxtaposition of unexpected elements to the body. These juxtapositions portray the Song's various disruptions of scale, for example, the portrayal of the woman's lips as a thread in relation to the size of her hair as goats, and teeth as sheep.[161] There is thus a clear disruption of scale in the portrayal of the woman's body, which reflects the poet's humour and tendency to portray caricatures with such incongruities (Black, 2009:132).

The strangeness of the juxtapositions is undoubtedly unsettling, as in the case of the woman's neck as the tower of David. The unease lies in the poet's use of both extreme size, and specific references, which combine the materiality of a tower's structure and its components with the harshness of war (Black, 2009:132). The strangeness of the

[160] Scholars debate the interpretation of this image due to the perplexing dimensions it imposes on the human form. One interpretation is the hypothesis of the lovers lying next to each other in such a way that, from the male lover's angle, the female lover's neck appears lengthened. This reading is countered by those who view the image as grim and dehumanising due to its application of architectures and the gore of war (Black, 2006:131). LaCocque (1998:100) refers to another interpretation which holds that the woman is so beautiful that a thousand warriors would lay down their weapons and surrender to her, but holds that it is misleading.

[161] See Black (2009:132) for examples of the juxtaposition of unexpected elements to the body.

juxtaposition is found in its intimate connection with the grotesque, as can be seen in the formerly discussed interdependence of the natural world and the human form.

5.4.2.3 Song 4:5

The organic components of the woman's body spills over into Song 4:5, where the male reader moves his focus downwards, settling his gaze on the woman's breasts. Assis (2009:124-125) identifies a clear order among the images in the poems as "animal",[162] "vegetable",[163] and "mineral",[164] after which a return is made to the animal world ("the fawns"). The abrupt transition[165] from the tower of David to the fawns is of importance, as it emphasises the last object in the series, which is the woman's breasts. The special emphasis reflects something of the man's interests, enthusiasm, and excitement at the sight of his lover's breasts. The woman's breasts serve as objects of the male lover's erotic interests, most likely indicating an intimate relationship (Longman, 2001:146).[166] "This enthusiasm is a good example of the man's progress and his capacity for greater intimacy" (Assis, 2009:125). Pope (1977:470) believes that this verse does not truly portray an adequate appraisal of biblical references to breasts. Yet there are various texts and several references outside of the Song which do portray women's breasts as objects of sexual male attraction.[167]

The twinned sheep (Song 4:2; 4:5; 7:4), used as a metaphor for the woman's breasts, is either culturally too foreign or subtle enough that the readers are left with some doubt regarding the meaning of the comparison (Longman, 1977:146). The reference to fawns/gazelle emphasises a variety of qualities, such as sleekness, speed, sensuality, and age. Longman (2001:147) identifies a fawn as a young deer, implying that the breasts might be those of a young, recently matured woman. The "fawns

[162] The male lover's descriptions start with images from the animal world, such as goats, doves, and the flock of shorn ewes (Assis, 2009:124).
[163] The image related to vegetation is the image of the pomegranate (Assis, 2009:124).
[164] According to Assis (2009:124), the third stage refers to the image from the inanimate world, namely the tower of David.
[165] The first three transitions from animal, to vegetable, and then to mineral, was gradual, unlike the last, abrupt transition (Assis, 2009:125).
[166] Assis (2009:125) provides the following explanation for the male lover's growth in intimacy: "In Unit II (Song 1:9-2:17), in the first descriptive poem in the Unit, in Song 1:9-11, the man had described the woman's head, but when he came to describe her neck he stopped short and did not lower his gaze downward towards his beloved's bosom. Indeed, the woman had felt this." In the woman's response in the second part of that poem (Song 1:12-14), she explicitly speaks about her desire for her beloved to rest between her breasts, despite her rejection of the man in Unit II due to his incomplete feelings towards her (Assis, 2009:125).
[167] Pope (1977:470) refers to "Ezek 16:7; 23:3,21; Hosea 2:4; 1:13; 7:4,8; 8:8,10" as texts portraying the female breasts as objects of sexual attraction.

gazing among the locusts" is a challenging image and scholars are divided on its interpretation. Most scholars interpret the fawns, or just their small tails, as representing the woman's protruding nipples, yet no sure interpretation exists for this image.[168] The image of the gazelle and a young stag are also used by the woman to describe her male lover (Song 2:17), emphasising a mutuality between them. The mutuality is of importance as it portrays the growth in intimacy and relationship after the woman rejected the male lover in Unit II, where his feelings towards her did not seem appropriate (Assis, 2009:125).

Black (2009:134) provides a unique interpretation of the verse by focusing on its grotesqueness. Black, in reference to the Song's frequent mingling and toing with images, remarks: "Tempted by its resistance to concise and finite displays of images, we see that the teeth of verse 2 gnaws through the rest of the descriptions." This creates a path of blood and death.

5.4.2.4 Song 4:6

Song 4:6 provides a change in the descriptive direction, beginning with a temporal phrase identical to the phrase found in Song 2:17, as the man interrupts his description of the woman's body with the phrase, "until the day breathes and the shadows flee I will go to the mountain of myrrh and the hull of frankincense" (Song 4:6). Assis (2009:126-127) ascribes this sudden change of direction to the male lover's embarrassment:

> The moment he mentioned the woman's breasts, he became confused and was not able to continue, and therefore he stops his description and expresses his desire to run away to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense.[169]

[168] LaCocque (1998:106) argues that the poet attempts to create an atmosphere, emphasising that no other song would better evoke such a harmonious similarity between firm softness and peaceful provocations in comparison to the woman's breasts as fawns, caught in the camera of the imagination. Longman (2001:147) seems to struggle with the various interpretations, and argues that "many commentators betray an insensitive literalness" when the woman's breasts are compared "to a vision of the backsides of fawns nuzzling among flowers".

[169] There exists no proof of mountains and hills with these names, especially not in Israel. The mountains of myrrh and hill of frankincense are also not indigenous to Palestine (Garrett, 1993:405).

Assis' explanation for the male lover's retreat from an intimate situation, accords with the end of the poem, where the intimacy never develops.

Longman (2001:147) counters Assis' argument of retreat and embarrassment, by arguing that the man's gaze remains on the woman, while he tastefully[170] and subtly describes his desire for her, and not the mountain of myrrh or the hull of frankincense. The man's determination to depict and enjoy the pleasures of the woman is restrained by the reality that intimacy will never fully develop, since the woman must freely give herself to her lover (Garrett, 1993:405). This verse is also connected to Song 3:6, where, at the beginning of the poem, the man states that the woman is perfumed with myrrh and frankincense. Therefore, when the male lover says that he will go to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense, he is actually saying that he wishes to go to his beloved (Assis, 2009:127).

Pope (1977:472) refers to the early Christian interpretation of this verse, which associated Christ's passion as the mystery hidden under the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense.[171] However, this Targum approach of the text lacks scholarly support as scholars have broken increasingly free from the traditional, allegorical approach.

5.4.2.5 Song 4:7

In Song 4:7, the first part of the w*asf* concludes with a general statement of the female lover's beauty. Song 4:7a parallels verse 1a to a large extent, creating an inclusion which provides readers with a sense of closure to this part of the poem, while asserting the woman's physical beauty in a positive manner. Song 4:7b follows Song 4:7a's positive assertion of the woman's beauty with a second assertion. However, this second assertion seems to be cast more negatively (Longman, 2001:148), as it describes the woman's beauty as free of all 'blemishes' or 'defects' (מְאוּם stemming

[170] "The sweet-smelling mountains of myrrh, a fragrant resin, and the mountains of Lebanon, also sweet smelling because of its association with the cedar tree, refer in some way to the sensual body of the woman" (Longman, 2001:147).
[171] See Pope (1977:472-473) for an in-depth discussion of early Christian interpretations of the verse and its relation to Christ's passion.

from the root of the masculine noun מְאוּם), referring to physical imperfections (Longman, 2001:148; Pope, 1977:473).[172]

The negativity of the Hebrew word lies in the fact that it is usually applied to animals with a defect of some sort, or a wide range of imperfections which result in making something ineligible for use in sacrificial rituals (Longman, 2001:148). It is of interest to mention that the phrase seems to be used in a nonreligious sense,[173] yet many interpreters have seized the opportunity to emphasise the Hebrew word as pointing to moral defects (Pope, 1977:473).[174] Despite the Hebrew word's moral connotations, there is no indication in the book or poem of explicit interests in anything else but the woman's physical beauty (Pope, 1977:473; Longman, 2001:148).

In conclusion, it is clear that these seven verses do not come without interpretational difficulties, as it is hard to say whether the depiction of the woman is concrete enough to provide readers with a real portrait of the female lover, or whether its metaphors and similes are just associative. Assis (2009:127) argues for a middle ground as scholars are divided on the matter. On the one end, the poem's metaphors focus on the woman's physical attributes as they seem connected to her actual appearance. On the other end, the depiction of the woman's physical features does not seem to serve as the poem's main theme, as it appears that the real theme is the man's attempt to attract his female lover by means of allusions and poetics (2009:128).

Assis (2009:128) argues for another approach, arguing that the poet is "inviting the reader into his world", while, at the same time, "leaving them out of it". The man's description of the woman's body provides insight into his attitudes towards her, yet, at the same time, the poem sheds light onto the man's aroused desire for the woman. The readers are thus given insight into the man's praises of the woman and the woman's yearning response for her male lover.

Looking at Assis' statement of the male lover's invitation to the readers, Brenner (1993:172) argues for a more negative portrayal of the woman's body as perceived by

[172] Pope (1977:473) argues that the word *mûm* is similar in sound to the word *mōmos*, meaning "blame or reproach", adding to the negativity of the second assertion of the woman's beauty.
[173] Further information regarding the nonreligious tone can be found in Pope (1977:473).
[174] Pope (1977:473) argues that verses 1-5 focus on the Shulamite's external beauty, where the woman's soul is disclosed in verse 6 by the extension of her physical beauty to her soul. It is here where her external appearance becomes less important.

the poem's readers and listeners. Brenner (1993:172) argues that, at any given point in the Song, the woman is portrayed as a sculpture and incomplete person, hardly a body able to be loved, and "an inventory of body parts that don't make up a whole". The lack of vital body parts causes the male lover's declared passion to lack credibility as the constraints of chastity serves as a "deconstructive (in the literal sense) and conventional (in the socio-sociological sense) agent" (Brenner, 1993:172).

A similar approach illuminates the female lover's objectification of the male body. It is of interest to mention that the grotesque is not just applicable to the female body, but also the male body. The male body in Song 5:10-16 is placed between Songs 4 and 7, correlating with these sections' attitude towards the body as a whole. Yet, unlike the female body in the Song 4:1-7 and Song 7:1-7 *wasfs*, the texts supply a complete head-to-toe illustration of the male body. "Yet, there is a vast difference between the terms used for depicting the male lover's head and those referring to the rest of his figure" (Brenner, 2005:173).

5.4.3 Song 5:10-16 – "His Mouth is Most Sweet"

From the beginning of Song 5:10 it is clear that this *wasf* differs from the other three *wasf* texts describing the female lover. There are similar features such as dripping lips and dove's eyes between Song 5:10-16 and the other w*asf* texts, but it is apparent that the general appearance of the poem is unique. General readers would identify the difference as 'opposites' in the texts, yet Black (2009:160) does not support the argument of 'opposites' but is rather arguing for the use of 'difference'. Black (2009:160) thus argues that the *wasf* poems differ from one another, but are never 'opposites'.

Readers otherwise ignore or seek ways to explain away the differences, usually arguing that the female lover was less imaginative than the man. Some deny the importance of the poem's 'difference' by arguing that its significance remains elusive, while others are uninterested in interrogating their presence (Black, 2009:160).[175] The 'difference' between the poems should not be denied or ignored as they provide the

[175] Scholars such as Exum (2005:202) argue that the difference is due to the man's more vivid and animated imagery, whereas the woman's imagery is more relational. The problem with Exum's account of the differences between the lovers' language is that she, like other scholars, attach it to modern stereotypes, undermining the idea of mutuality and erotica as found in the theme of 'gazing' in the Song (Black, 2009:160).

opportunity to investigate the Song's contours in terms of themes such as erotica and gazing. The differences thus invite the replacement of rationally expected figurations of the human body with the grotesquely unexpected, providing readers with uncertainty, and unmanageable and unreliable images of the human body (2009:160).

The description of the male lover in Song 5:10-16 is the result of the question posed by the daughters of Jerusalem in Song 5:2-7.[176] The woman provides a purely physical and stylised description of her male lover, depicting him in third person. This manner of description provides insight into the major difference between the poems, as it is clear that a direct consuming engagement with the body is not part of the woman's depiction of the man. The woman does not so much express her feelings as she is trying to convince the daughters of Jerusalem of her lover's uniqueness of appearance (Black, 2009:161).

5.4.3.1 Song 5:10

In this poem, the women of Jerusalem, in a slightly hostile tone, confront the female lover, demanding to know what she finds so special about her lover in order to carry on about him in such a fashion. The woman responds with a w*asf* as an inventory of the male body (Jensen, 2005:56). It is reasonable to say that there is something odd about the male body, as if its significance remains as elusive as the female body.

> His body might be odd, but no odder than hers. It is just different in its oddity. The body's similarity, lies in its grotesqueness, yet its grotesqueness depends on different features than hers (Black, 2000:319).

The woman begins her depiction and description of the male body by focusing on the upper parts (hair and face), proceeding down to his lower parts (legs and feet). The woman's description of her lover is thus not an image of a complete body, but rather a portrait of ideal masculinity and male desirability according to the ancient world's standards of physical beauty. Keck (1997:415) believes the poem to be the female lover's attempt to persuade her audience to see her lover as she does: the ideal, desired man. She describes her lover as radiant (ṣaḥ stemming from the root of the

[176] Here the woman reports missing an encounter with her lover after which she goes out into the streets looking for him and meeting the watchmen instead. The watchmen beat and strip her. The poem ends with the woman appealing to the daughters of Jerusalem to inform her lover of her current state of mind concerning him (Black, 2009:161).

adjective צַח), denoting the health of his skin. Pope (1977:522-523) analyses the word by tracing it back to its Arabic heritage, and argues that it is connected to redness and associated with cosmetics. Longman (2001:170) does not share in Pope's analysis, but holds that the word signifies a broad swath of the colour spectrum, including a brownish red colour, signifying the man's colour of skin rather than cosmetics.

The woman also begins her description with a *hapax* (דָּגוּל stemming from the root of the feminine noun רְבָבָה), describing her lover as one in ten thousand.[177] Longman (2001:170) believes this to be an idiom, implying that there is no other man like him. The *hapax* (דָּגוּל) can also mean "bearing a flag or a banner", alluding to the grotesque battle images in the Song, portraying the man as being "conspicuous in battle among ten-thousand". The poet's reference to ten thousand (מֵרְבָבָה) is explainable by the fact that it is the "highest number designated by a single word in Hebrew" (Assis, 2009:167).

5.4.3.2. *Song 5:11*

The woman proceeds to the specification of different parts of the man's body, beginning with his head (כֶּתֶם stemming from root of the masculine noun פָּז) and working her way downwards. The term *keṯem*, whether of Sumerian or Egyptian origin, refers to a special kind of gold. The poet's additional *pāz* is of an unknown origin. The combination of *keṯem pāz* is found nowhere else but in Daniel 10:15, where the "loins of the anthropoid is girted" with it (Pope, 1977:534). *Pāz* is thus regarded as the gloss to *keṯem* (Pope, 1977:536). Assis (2009:167) argues that the words *keṯem pāz* describe more than a gloss, as the compilation of the two words expresses the finest type of substance. Longman (2001:170) speculates that the woman could be insinuating that her lover's appearance is "God-like" with this reference.

The second part of the description is clear. The woman describes the man's hair as black and wavy as a raven. The word for 'black' is not unusual and is used in Song 1:5-6. The ancient world generally associated black hair with youth and health. According to Pope (1977:536), in times of examination for skin diseases, priests checked whether an individual's hairs were white (morbid) or black (healthy). The

[177] The meaning of (דָּגוּל) *dagul* has caused a great amount of debate among interpreters since its root occurs in various chapters such as 2:4; 6:4, 10. The LXX and Vulgate provide help in the understanding of the word by tracing it back to its Akkadian root *dagālu* ("to look", "to see") (Longman, 2001:170; Pope, 1977:532).

problem with the woman's description of the man's hair arises at the first compliment, which scholars have hesitantly translated as 'waves' (תַּלְתַּלִּים stemming from the root of the feminine noun קְוָצוֹת).[178] The term for 'waves' is a *hapax* in the Old Testament, used in rabbinic literature to refer to curls, often associated with the word used for locks. A large number of scholars still translate the word as 'waves' or 'curls' due to the lack of a better translation (Longman, 2001:171).

5.4.3.3 Song 5:12

After her description of her lover's hair, the woman moves further down, describing the man's eyes by likening them to doves. There is some debate about whether the entire verse is dedicated to the man's eyes. The phrase "washed in milk" possibly refers to the white of the eye, where the pupils are like bathing doves. The poet's extended metaphor of doves by streams of water, bathed in milk, seems to emphasise the glistening nature of the man's eyes. It is thus clear that the poet was playing with reality while trying to create an image of the man's pupils highlighted by the whiteness of the eyes (Longman, 2001:172).

The male and female body both serve as hybrids of various elements,[179] yet the male body is somehow able to subvert the grotesque binary, as well as its own "normatives", against the peculiarity of the female body. This implies that the male body can, in fact, be manipulated with implications for gendered readings of the Song of Songs. Black (2000:320) attests to the hybridised nature of the male body[180], emphasising the way in which the grotesque interferes with the texts as "teasing, an attraction, then perversion" (Black, 2000:320). Black's findings of the grotesque's influence on the text is of great importance as it shifts gears, leaving the matter of representation in hindsight, while pointing towards the heart of the Song, which is an investigation into the textures of desire. Black's findings and emphasis on the textures of desire is of grave importance as it invites fragility of desire, vulnerability, and absence into conversation with the reality of the grotesque.

[178] Pope (1977:536) provides insight into the rabbinical Hebrew use of the word as "curly" or "wavy".
[179] Hybridisation is transgressive as its "efficacy in terms of the grotesque lies in its ability to produce new possibilities and strange instabilities in a given semiotic system" (Black, 2000:319).
[180] Black refers here to the manner in which the male body is described/illustrated.

5.4.3.4 Song 5:13

In Song 5:13a the woman shifts from the man's eyes, to describing her lover's cheeks: "His cheeks are like beds of spices, towers of perfumes". Assis (2009:167) believes that the woman might be describing her lover's beard,[181] which could seem like a garden-bed of spices for her, growing just like a beard. The word (מֶרְקָחֵים stemming from the root of the masculine noun מֶרְקָחִים) has a related root, meaning a type of perfume, or the process of preparing the perfume as indicated by the parallelism to the word (הַבֹּשֶׂם) in the first colon.[182] The root relation to "the process of preparing perfume" is encouraged by Longman's (2001:172) belief that the woman's emphasis on the beard had nothing to do with its looks, but rather its smell. The image thus implies a certain physical closeness, as well the woman's desire to get even closer to her lover (2001:172).

The poet's use of the expression (מִגְדְּלוֹת) is the feminine plural form of the word ("tower"). The expression is unfortunately not clear when placed in the context of the verse, causing many interpreters to interpret it as the place where the plants grow (a garden). By translating the word "tower", the word would stem from the masculine noun (מִגְדָּל), where as a translation of the word as "garden" would stem from the feminine noun (עֲרוּגַת). The words מִגְדְּלוֹת מֶרְקָחֵים are parallel with the expression "bed of spices" (כַּעֲרוּגַת הַבֹּשֶׂם). There is also no clear similarity between the man's lips, the lilies, and dripping myrrh to which he is compared. Assis (2009:168) writes the following on the description of the man's lips like lilies dripping with myrrh:

> This description is part of the description of the garden which began with the description of the man's cheeks, and she continues to enlarge the metaphor to include the lilies which mark the lips and the scent of the perfumes that wafts up from the fine garden.

Looking at the scents of the perfumes that waft up from the fine garden, the man's lips had aroused some desire within the woman, lips dripping with liquid myrrh (Song 5:5) while her lips dripped with honey (Song 4:11) (Longman, 2009:173).

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[181] Throughout the history of Israel, men wore beards as there were laws prohibiting them from clipping them (Lev 19:27; 21:5). Shaving was also seen as an embarrassment (2 Sam 104; Isa 15: 2) (Longman, 2001:172).
[182] The parallelism can also be found in Exodus 30:35 (Assis, 2009:168).

5.4.3.5 Song 5:14-15

The woman's description of the man's body moves further down, describing his arms and sexual organs. The woman describes the man's arms as gold cylinders or rods filled with precious Tarshish stones. It is possible that the descriptions in Song 14-15 pictures the man as being a statue.[183] The language used also reflects the possibility of a physical reality, implying the possibility that his arms are covered with golden bracelets with gems (possibly sapphires) set in them. It is possible that this depiction serves to emphasise how precious each part of the man's physical attributes are to her. The man's arms are bejewelled with gold and gems (Longman, 2001:173).

The second part of the verse provides its readers with a challenge as most interpreters would read it as simply referring to the man's stomach as smooth as a slab of 'ivory'.[184] Longman (2001:173) argues that the poet's decoration with 'lapis', a precious blue stone, contributes to highlight the man's preciousness. He writes that "in such an erotic poem, the line at the least is suggestive of, if not explicitly referring to, the man's member, and thus is to be compared to the well-garden imagery in Song 4:12-13." Longman further argues that the translation of 'member' (*me'em*) has a strong sense of eroticism as can be found in the woman in Song 5:4.

All of the descriptions including images of precious stones, ivory, and gold are used to capture the man's rare beauty and uniqueness. The poet's use of hard metals and gems are used to express the male lover's power and describe his muscles. Yet, the woman ends the poem with a reference to the man's general appearance in Song 5:15: "His looks are like Lebanon, choice as the cedars". The trees from Lebanon are the famous cedar trees, known as superbly tall and bole trees. Assis (2009:169) thus argues that the woman was providing insight into her beloved's noble and erect appearance.

[183] This does not imply that the man is really an idol, despite some of the language's descriptions which could be used to describe the statues which represented the gods in the ancient Near East. It is possible that the woman is using god-like language to describe her lover (Longman, 2009:173).
[184] Pope (1977:543) is of opinion that interpreters should not restrict their reading by only referring to the man's 'body, 'belly', or 'waist'. Reference to the 'waist' is too narrow and 'belly' is too much of a one-sided term. Pope thus argues for the usage of the term 'loins', as it includes the lumbar region, back, sides, and front.

5.4.3.6 Song 5:16

The woman makes another general reference at the end of the w*asf* poem, shifting her focus from her beloved's appearance to his taste: "His mouth is sweet, and he is altogether desirable". The woman ends the poem by contently saying: "This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem" (Song 5:16b). Keck (1997:416) summarises these words as: "Now do you see what I mean?", providing a response to the question of the daughters in verse Song 5:9).

The term *rēa'* means 'friend', 'companion', or 'neighbour', with a varying degree of intimacy without any sexual implications. The level of intimacy thus stretches from a casual meeting to one where the relations are more permanent, and trust is established (Pope, 1977:549). If the lovers in the Song, as well as its readers, are subjected to the itemisation of their own bodies by their lovers (a real flesh-and-blood lover), the reality of potential ridicule and the threat of exposure comes to life no matter how much trust exists between the lovers.

In the poem, the woman describes her lover, but addresses the daughters of Jerusalem rather than her lover. In her process of addressing the daughters, the woman conjures up the lover's image in her memory instead of describing what she sees. This manner of doing is explanatory of the poem's lack of sensuality and vitality, failing to create a sense of attraction and intimacy as found in the rest of the Song. Assis (2009:174) argues that the connection between the daughters of Jerusalem and the woman leaves no space for further relationship between the man and woman. The void between the two lovers create a main theme of absence in the Song. The absence in the love poetry forms part of the discourse of a sense of distress – the woman's distress of her lover's absence (Longman, 2009:174).

5.4.4 Song 6:4-7 – "Turn away your eyes from me"

This poem begins a new focus point as there is no continuation of the woman's words as found in the former w*asf* poem. The poem essentially serves as a descriptive poem containing elements of adoration (Song 6:4-5a, 8-10) and description (Song 6:5b-7) (Assis, 2009:187; Longman, 2001:177). It is also the second wa*sf* in which the man depicts the woman's beauty, repeating imagery found in Song 4:1-7. Despite the repetition, the poem is filled with alterations, as seen in Song 8-10, which argue for the

woman's superiority and uniqueness in comparison to the beauty of others.[185] In Song 6:5, the woman's beauty seems to overwhelm the man, shaking him to his very core. Black (2000: 98) disagrees with Longman's (2001:177) positive interpretation of the textual repetition by arguing that the depiction found in Song 6:4-7 is nothing else but a general statement of the woman's body.[186] The difference between the lover's initial and beneficent statement of the woman's beauty (Song 4:1-5) and that found in Song 6:4-7, should not be easily overlooked as it highlights change within the poem. Black (2000:98) defines the male lover's statement as both perplexing and alarming as he has shifted from lovingly describing the woman's eyes as doves, to asking her to turn them away (Song 6:5). The male lover's request seems strange and out of place as it is clear that the woman's eyes are not hidden behind a veil as seen in Song 4:1-5, nor do they remind him of doves. Rather, they appear to be a source of disturbance.

5.4.4.1 Song 6:4-5a

The impressive beauty of the cities, which are utilised as images for feminine beauty in the Bible,[187] may seem strange to the contemporary reader. Yet, these images provide insight into the male lover's perspective of his female lover. The poet's reference to the city of Tirzah is not aimed at communicating dates or information, as there is no information on the city before or after the reigns of Jeroboam of Omri.[188] The name derives from the root (רצה), meaning "desired" or "wanted".[189] Assis (2009:188) speculates that the poet uses the word because of the meaning behind it, and supposedly also because of the great city's beauty of which scholars have no

[185] The others, who are referred to as "sixty queens, eighty concubines, and countless young women", will enthusiastically share in the assessment of the woman's beauty (6:10) (Longman, 2001:177).
[186] Assis (2009:187) shares in Longman's (2001:177) positive viewing of the poem, arguing that the poem represents the man's praising of the woman's beauty. This praising begins and ends with metaphorical images of the woman's beauty, which depict her as superlative. In the poem's opening verse, the woman's beauty is compared to large capital cities, while the closing verse likens her beauty to that of the moon and sun (Assis, 2009:187). It seems as if this positive viewing of the woman's beauty does not leave room for Black's identification of grotesqueness in the poem.
[187] Cities such as Jerusalem, Zion, Babylon, and Tirzah were likened to women and vice versa (Assis, 2009:188).
[188] The city of Tirzah seemed to have had a fleeting moment of fame as the capital of the Northern Kingdom (1 Kings 14:17; 15:21, 33; 16:6, 8, 9, 15, 17, 23) until Omri moved the city capital to his new city in Samaria (1 Kings 16:24, 28) (Longman, 2001:179). The name also only appears in Numbers 26:33 and 7:1 as a woman's name (Assis, 2009:188).
[189] The Vulgate, Syriac, and Septuagint did not interpret the word as a proper noun, but as a word stemming from the identified root (Assis, 2009:188). Pope (1977:558-559) argues along the same lines when comparing the word to an Ugaritic grammatical construction, and hypothesising that *ktrsh* could have been mistakenly interpreted as the name of the city of Tirzah. It is of interest to mention that the Ugaritic use of the assertive *k* before a word is to refer to beauty – presumably beauty in verbal form.

further information. There is no clear surety regarding the poet's intended comparison between the woman's beauty and the cities of Tirzah and Jerusalem, as political enmity between the North and the South was overwhelming. Longman (2001:179) argues that the poet "may have transcended the political enmity to make the comparison", thus evoking the two beautiful and powerful cities. The power of the two cities is fitting as the next half verse indicates that the woman's beauty does not just arouse desire but also fear (Longman, 2001:179).

Unlike the poet's reference to the city of Tirzah, the reference to Jerusalem seems obvious and natural as Jerusalem is identified as the "perfection of beauty" (Psalm 50:2), as "magnificent in elevation", and evoking awe and joy (Psalm 122) (Longman, 2001:180).[190] Garrett (1993:417) argues that the intent of the verse is to highlight the man's wonder and awe, as seen in his comparison of the woman's neck to the tower of David. The man is thus completely aware of the fact that he cannot force himself upon the woman as she is as fierce as a stronghold. The man's power is thus shaken by the woman's beauty, strength, and power resembled in her comparison to the cities in Song 6:4.

The poet's use of such military images/metaphors in a love poem is undoubtedly odd to the general reader. Yet, when viewed from a psychological angle, it makes complete sense as the presence of the one who is loved can cause one to be paralysed with fear (Longman, 2001:180). Longman argues that the woman's beauty is of such overpowering nature that it arouses both joy and fear within the male lover. This overpowering beauty, as formerly stated in Song 4:1-7, is introduced to the reader by focusing on the woman's eyes. In the first half of Song 6:5, the man's focus is shifted from just referring to the woman's beautiful eyes, to vocalising their overwhelming nature. "It is the face, particularly the eyes, that bring us into the most intense contact with another person" (Longman, 2001:180). Song 6:4c is seen as the verse's most difficult phrase (אֲיֻמָּה כַּנִּדְגָּלוֹת). (אֲיֻמָּה stemming from the root of the אֵימִים), which can be translated as "dreadful", "frightful", and "terrifying",[191] is surprisingly used in a positive

[190] Assis (2009:188) sheds further light onto the beauty and importance of Jerusalem likened to the woman by incorporating the role of Solomon in both the Song and Jerusalem.

[191] This is seen in Habakkuk 1:7, where the fearsome Chaldeans are described as those who, by the rousing of YHWH, will seize the dwelling places (1:6), and came for "violence, gathering their captives like sand" (1:9) (Black, 2009:139). Keel (1994:215) writes the following regarding the poet's use of the phrase: "Something that truly fascinates humans also engenders respect and awe – even anxiety; in the same way, something that inspires respect and awe almost always fascinates humans. Both

context, denoting a strong description which can be translated with words such as "grand" or "exalted". The poet's use of the word אַיֻּמָּה indicates the lack of intimacy reflected by his discomfort with having the woman looking into his eyes (Assis, 2009:188).

The interpretation of the word (כַּנִּדְגָּלוֹת) is obscure, especially when placed in context with the fourth verse.[192] Assis (2009:189) and Pope (2001:560) interpret it as "seen" or "banner", depicting the woman as awe-inspiring since her appearance leaves a strong impression.[193] The woman's strong impression and extraordinary appearance overwhelms her male lover, causing him to use the words (הטבי עינ׳ד), asking her to taker her eyes off him.[194] Assis (2009:189) argues that the man's word choice is explainable by the words in Song 6:5a: "they overwhelm me" (Keck, 1997:418)/ "your eyes are stronger than me" (שֶׁהֵם הִיבֵּנִי).[195]

It is of interest to mention that it is not only the woman's gaze which provokes emotions, as the man's gaze in Song 2:4 (דגלז) also engenders a profound response from the woman. From this moment of gazing, the man smoothly moves on to describing the woman's head (Assis, 2009:190). The eyes thus also serve as a cipher for the grotesque body, invoking the changeability and transformation of the human body. The eyes "mark the inversions that are so characteristic of the grotesque" (Black, 2009:185).

5.4.4.2 Song 6:5b-7

Verse 6:5a portrays a kind of textual hybridisation which gives insight into the poem's "grotesquery" on a textual level (textual body) (Black, 2009:137). Verse Song 6:5b comments on the woman's hair, sharing in Song 4:1's metaphor.

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elements are contained in the picture of the city and its mighty walls and towers. Verse 4c now unfolds the other side, saying of the beloved that she is as 'terrifying as an army with banners'… This hauntingly beautiful woman commands respect, for she exhibits the inner order, the strict discipline, of an army grouped around banners in battle formation; the loving admirer is rendered shy and reserved in her presence."

[192] The word is identified as a passive feminine plural for "banner" or "flag" (דֶּגֶל) (Assis, 2009:188).

[193] The man is depicting his female lover in the same manner as she has depicted him in Song5:10. In Song 5:10 the woman depicted the man as "distinguished among a myriad" (דגזל מרבבה), and now, in reciprocity, he calls her "awesome as the most distinguished" (כַּנִּדְגָּלוֹת. אַיֻּמָּה), using the same word (דגל) with a different inflection (Assis, 2009:189).

[194] The effect of the woman's gaze also appears in Song 4:9 (Assis, 2009:190).

[195] The Assyrians interpreted it as "they make me tremble" while the Arabic interpreted it as "they scare me" (Assis, 2009:189).

In Song 6:6 the poet shifts to praising the woman's teeth, using language nearly identical to that of Song 4:2. The variation between the verses clearly indicates the poet's change in comparison, shifting from "shorn sheep" to "ewes" (Longman, 2001:181). The reason for the poet's change in comparison is unclear, yet the poet's intended meaning seems unaffected.

Song 6:7 also provides a repetition of description. Readers may expect the man to turn his attention to the female lover's lips as seen in Song 4:3, yet he passes by her lips, rather focusing on her temple whilst using the same terms as found in Song 4:3b (Longman, 2001:181).

The fleshly desire for the other is thus riddled by tension and inconsistencies which highlight the reality of times of doubt, the quest for possession, envy, loss of drive, or even the feeling of repulsion which form part of the lovers' relationship (Black, 2000:320). The tension surrounding desire, as found in the struggle between repression and instinctual energy, which is experienced by both lovers and readers, results in beauty. "In its pure form, the desire is to unite with, to integrate, and to destroy the otherness of the other" (Landy, 2011:134).

5.4.5 Song 7:1-10 – "The Shepherd's Seduction"

Song 7:1-10 is considered the start of a new poem as its speaker has shifted from the speaking woman, to the woman being addressed (Song 7:1). The poem's opening verse (Song 7:1), in which the woman is called to return, is succeeded by the beginning of a descriptive poem of her body (Song 7:2). The poet changes the descriptive pattern in the fourth *wasf*, describing the woman's body from her feet to her head (Song 7:6) (Assis, 2009:203).

Song 7:7 provides the reader with a general statement of the woman's beauty.[196] In Song 7:8, the man, who has described in detail the beauty of the woman's features, "now speaks more generally of her stature resembling a palm tree" (Assis, 2009:203). This manner of doing concurs with the woman's description of the man in Song 5:10-16, in which the woman likened the man's general appearance to a tree of cedar and

[196] Other descriptive poems in the book ended with such statements, as seen in chapter 4:7 (Assis, 2009:203).

Lebanon (Song 5:15).[197] In Song 8b and 9a, the man continues likening the woman to a palm tree by saying that he wants to climb it. He furthers the bodily description by likening the woman's features to fruit: her breasts, her palate, and the scent of her nose are likened to clusters of apples, grapevines, and good wine. Song 7:9b serves as the woman's response to the man's words of desire and description, making way for the beginning of a new poem in Song 7:10.

The poem thus serves as a descriptive poem of the woman's body, indicating the man's desire, as seen in his arousal by wanting to climb the palm tree and hold on to its branches. Many scholars have regarded the *wasf* as two poems – a compilation of a descriptive and yearning poem, connected by (זֹאת) – indicating the transition which the man undergoes within the poem (Assis, 2009:204). Assis (2009:204) writes the following regarding the transition from a descriptive poem to a poem of yearning:

> The transition from description to desire is a central motif in the Song of Songs in general, and here it takes place within the poem itself. Avoiding strict formalism and not regarding the change in genre in an overly rigid manner, there should not be any problem in passing from a descriptive to a yearning mode within a single poem.[198]

The poem thus begins with the man's description of the woman in Song 6:1-7, after which the man moves on to express his desire for the woman in Song 7:8-9a.

5.4.5.1 Song 6:13 (7:1)

Most scholars view this verse as the first of Song 7, arguing that it serves as the first half of Song 7:1. Song 6:13 provides no clear indication or identification as to whom the speaker is, as the speaker uses the plural form. The speaker addresses the woman, calling her to return, where as in Song 6:13b the second-person plural is used, indicating the woman's shift to the third person viewing (Assis, 2009:205. It is thus fair to conclude that Song 6:13a and b contain speeches from various speakers as seen

[197] Scholars debate over the poem's ending, arguing for verse 7 as a possible ending for the *wasf* poem. Verse 8 begins with the word "this" (זֹאת) indicating that the verse refers to a previous description (Assis, 2009:203). Assis (2009:203) and Longman (2001:188) therefore agree that a new poem only begins in verse 11. See Assis (2009:203), Longman (2001:188), and Keel (1994:251) for further information on the poem's structure.

[198] The majority of scholars accept the definition of two genres, yet, scholars still disagree on whether to "view the change of genre as an indication of a new poem, or whether to see it as a shift" in the same poem (Assis, 2009:204).

when the poem moves from an imperative directed at the Shulamite, to a sentence seeming to question a command (Longman, 2001:191).

The speaker of Song 6:13a could be a chorus, a man, or the daughters of Jerusalem, while the speaker of Song 6:13b could also be a chorus, the daughters of Jerusalem, a man, or even a woman. "Each of these possibilities, in any of their combinations, would fit the text" as there is nothing to negate the possibility of the male speaker who speaks in the plural as did the woman in Song 1:4 (Assis, 2009:205).[199] The continuation of the verse, "Why should you look (gaze)", is speculated to be the man addressing his friends.[200]

The poet's reference to the "Shulamite"[201] possibly derives from the word "Shalem", an epithet for the city of Jerusalem, identifying the woman "as the one who comes from Jerusalem" (Assis, 2009:205). Scholars also identify the word as the feminine form of the name "Solomon" (שלמה), who plays a prominent role in two sections in the Song of Songs i.e. Song 3:6-11 and Song 8:11-12, as well as its title and introduction. (Longman, 2001:192). Scholars also link the epithet to the word "peace" or "the perfect one" (שלום), creating an anticipatory allusion to the woman's words in Song 8:10 ("Then I was in his eyes as one who finds peace") (Assis, 2009:205). The woman can thus be seen as the one who brings peace to the one who loves her. It is of interest to mention that the *wasf* poem in Song 6:13 is the only place in the book where the name "Shulamite" appears, since it would be dubious to refer to the woman as the Shulamite throughout the Song.

The longing for the woman and her perfection is expressed by the call that she might return and be gazed upon. "The woman's absence is obviously keenly felt in view of the fourfold repetition of the word "return".[202] The speaker is clearly asking to see the woman, where in the second half of the verse, the speaker shifts over to speaking in

[199] Throughout the Song the only plural speakers are the daughters of Jerusalem causing Longman (2001:191) to identify them as a kind of chorus in the verse. In Song 8:8-9, the woman's brothers will also speak, but it is impossible to identify them as the current speakers (Longman, 2001:191). Scholars do not disqualify the possibility of the woman herself serving as the speaker, implying that the woman speaks of herself in the third person. The content of the woman's response indicates either her lack of self-consciousness or her humility. Longman argues that the woman is possibly playing a coy, yet, it still sets up the descriptive poem in Song 7:1-9.
[200] Assis (2009:205) deems this as the only sensible possibility.
[201] According to Assis (2009:205), Shulamite does not serve as a personal name but rather a type of nickname as its meaning is not clear.
[202] The theme of absence will receive further attention in chapter 6 of this study.

the plural by asking, “Why should you look at the Shulamite, as upon a dance of two camps/circles?” (הַמַּחֲנָיִם[204] כִּמְחֹלַת[203] בַּשּׁוּלַמִּית תֶּחֱזוּ־מַה).[205] It is difficult to interpret the importance of the rhetorical question, “Why should you look...?”, as it has a strong negative tone, encouraging the onlookers not to look at the woman as one would look at the dance of two circles, as the woman is not seen as fitting enough (Assis, 2009:206).

Assis (2009:206) suggests the possibility of the woman serving as the speaker who modestly states that she has nothing to be gazed upon. Scholars thus provide various possibilities for the interpretation and understanding of the rhetorical question, “Why should you look...?”, hoping to find the poet’s intended meaning.[206] “But it could be that it means the opposite – that out of adoration for the looks of the woman it says that it is agreeable to watch her as to watch the dance of the two circles” (Assis 2009:206). The Shulamite’s appearance is thus just as impressive as the dance of two camps/circles (הַמַּחֲנָיִם). Longman (2001:193) brings a battle-orientated interpretation to the table, interpreting the word for camps/circles (“Mahanaim”, הַמַּחֲנָיִם), as well as the verse’s rhetorical question, as a battle scene between two armies:[207]

> Imagine the scene of a battle from a point overlooking the battlefield. As two armies encounter one another, who could turn their eyes from the scene as they watched the strategic moves and countermoves of attack and defence?

The depiction of the woman’s appearance in military terms is nothing new as seen in the formerly discussed *wasf* poems. The verse in itself is thus complex, yet the emotion it expresses is clear. The chorus articulates emotions such as longing and desire as to create a closer intimacy between the two lovers. In poetry, it is not the event which carries the gravitas, but rather the emotions it arouses (Assis, 2009:207).

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[203] This word is the feminine form of the word (מְחֹלַת), meaning “dance” (Assis, 2009:206).
[204] This word is the geminate form of the word מחנה.
[205] The meaning of the word “mahanaim” (הַמַּחֲנָיִם) is not clear as it can either be taken as the proper name of a village mentioned in Gen 32:2 or mean “two groups”. Garrett (1993:421) argues that the word refers to the name of some dance unknown to the modern reader, yet known by the ancient Israelites.
[206] Assis (2009:206), Exum (2005:230), and Longman (2001:193) provide their readers with further possibilities to understanding the poet’s rhetorical question.
[207] Longman’s (2001:193) battle orientated interpretation is made possible by the theme of gazing, as it is due to the speaker’s mesmerised gaze of the woman’s dance (depicted by the colourful expression of the battle dance of the two war camps), that the battle scene is made possible.

The interpretational challenge within the verse undoubtedly confuses its readers. Readers are thus encouraged to shift their focus onto the aroused emotions within the poem. The poem begins with a distance between the lovers and an absence of conducted dialogue between them, which creates a strong sense of uncertainty (Assis, 2009:206). Assis further argues that the created uncertainty is deliberately induced, leaving the reader intentionally uncertain of the speaker's identity and "the extent of the emotional intimacy between the man and the woman at the beginning of the poem as seen in Song 6:13 (7:1)".

The former descriptive poem (Song 6:4-10) ended with the likening of the woman's beauty to the sun and moon. These comparisons create a sense of unbridgeable remoteness as they are elements of distance. It is of interest to mention that it is not the woman who is distant, as the distance is reflected "in the style of the images invoked by the man (Song 6:4-10)" (Assis, 2009:207). The woman's call to return in Song 6:13 is thus not concerned with her physical location, but rather the man's feelings of desire and longing.[208]

5.4.5.2 Song 7:1

The final w*asf* poem in the Song 7:1-10 is undoubtedly different from the previous three *wasfs* (Song 4:1-15; Song 5:10-16; Song 6:4-8) as the man begins to speak once again, starting his depiction by describing his beloved's feet ("How beautiful your sandaled feet").[209] Longman (2001:193) identifies this reversal as compelled by the previous verse, remarking on the woman's dance while focusing attention on her feet. This serves as a possible reason as to why the woman's feet are specifically mentioned as sandaled, as she is involved in dancing. Longman (2001:194) further argues that appropriate footwear enhances the erotic attraction of the woman's feet (cf. Garrett, 1993:421; Assis, 2009:208). The man shifts his attention from the woman's feet to describing her thighs (חֲמוּקֵי יְרֵכַיִךְ).[210] The man's comparison of his lover's thighs to jewellery (חלאים stemming from the root of the masculine noun חֶלְיִי)

[208] The call to return is thus metaphorical, emphasising the man's emotions. This form of understanding emanates from the book's lyrical nature (Assis, 2009:207).
[209] There is a great amount of debate regarding the intended meaning of the word "feet" (פְּעָמַיִךְ). See e.g. Isa 26:2, 2Kgs 19, 24, and Ps 58:11 (58:10) (Assis, 2009:208). "It is possible that the meaning is 'steps' as in other instances, see Judges 5:28; Ps 85:14 (85:13); 119:133."
[210] The reference to the thigh is not just the thigh alone. Rather, it refers to the thigh, buttocks, or lower abdomen region. However, it does not refer to the entire leg (Garrett, 1993:421).

could imply that her thighs seem finely and perfectly crafted by an artist. The word (חמזק) either refers to the hidden part between the thighs or its curved shape (Assis, 2009:208; Garrett, 1993:421; Longman, 2001:195). In the midst of his fixation on the woman's moving body, the man describes the sensuous beauty of her feet and hips as she dances.

5.4.5.3 Song 7:2

In the second verse, the man moves on, looking at the woman's navel (שרר) and belly area, likening it to a crescent basin. Assis (2001:209) translates (שרר) with "basin", arguing for its bowl-like shape (Exod 24:6; Isa 22:24), while Garrett (1993:421) translates it as a "goblet", which never runs dry and satisfies the man's thirst. After having likened his lover's navel, the man imagines it full of (מזג stemming from the primitive root of the verb מָסַךְ), which is assumed to be a blended wine.[211] Scholars such as Pope (1977:617) associate the Hebrew word "navel" (שרר) with the woman's genitalia, arguing that the navel is not a particularly moist location, whereas the vulva is. During sexual excitement, the vulva is constantly moist and has its own scent as it does in the case of blended wine (מזג), which is repeated in Song 7:10.[212]

The male attraction to the female navel could be due to its proximity and likeness to the vulva. "This indirect reference to the vulva is in keeping with the poet's strategy of tasteful, though erotic allusions to the woman's body" (Longman, 2001:195). Whether the man is literary referring to the woman's vulva or navel, the image still evokes a comparison based on taste. Thus, the man's description of the woman's aperture as containing blended wine, clearly implies the male lover's desire to drink from her sensual basin, which serves as a tasteful and subtle allusion to intimacies and sex.

The image of wine also brings together teeth, mouth, breasts, and vagina, causing the images to collapse into each other as the body's erotic sites. Black (2009:153) writes the following regarding the lover's erotic-cannibalistic feast as he eats, drinks, and

[211] The word does not appear anywhere else in the Bible, serving as a prevalent word in Mishnaic texts (Assis, 2009:209).
[212] Pope (1977:620) raises the possibility of the word meaning 'semen', but later rejects it. The word also holds the possibility of being translated as menstrual blood, yet this translation seems unlikely since it would seem odd that the woman would be urged to continually menstruate (Black, 2009:151).

tastes (fluids/wines, the clitoris, and nipples), creating erotic emotions within himself and his lover's body:

> In sum, the body is frequently 'ready' for or engaged in intercourse, but yet it is in inviting/waiting and forbidden at the same time. The key to the grotesqueness here is the body-in-process (the uncontrolled body), with its liquidity and instability. Her sexual fluids or her menstrual blood never ceases – the wine is never ending – she exudes scent; she is fecund.

The poet's use of images continually emphasises the woman's body in process, for her body is neither fixed nor static as it reappears in other contexts, which invites readers to experience various elements of the body.

After having painted an image of the woman's navel, the man shifts over to depicting the woman's belly as a heap of wheat. The use of this image is difficult to understand as it is a foreign concept in the minds of contemporary readers. Wheat is known as one of ancient Israel's main food products, also serving as a symbol of humankind's viability (Assis, 2009:209; Longman, 2001:195). Longman (201:195), alongside other scholars, suggests that the image of wheat is not a visual one, but rather a metaphor of fertility. In such an interpretation, the comparison would refer to the woman's womb as a whole, rather her belly. The reference to the womb once again alludes to the woman's genitalia, where the heap of wheat resembles vaginal hair. This depiction of the heap of wheat surrounded by lilies serves as a work of art to the man, framed by the aspect of beauty (Longman, 2001:195; Assis, 2009:209).

5.4.5.4 Song 7:3-4

In Song 7:3, the man focuses his attention on the woman's breasts, likening them to a pair of twin fawns as seen in Song 4:5. From Song 7:3, the man's gaze moves upward, praising the woman's neck, eyes, and nose. He likens her neck to an ivory tower, her eyes to the pools of the city of Heshbon, and her nose to the tower Lebanon. The man's comparison of the woman's neck to an ivory tower correlates with the first female w*asf* in Song 4:4 where her neck was described as the tower of David.[213] The woman's neck is thus not a long, thick, fat neck, but is rather a strong, grand, elegant,

[213] Unlike the man's former likening and description of the "Tower of David" in Song4:4, no military metaphors are implied.

and dignified neck. Ivory is known as a precious material, suggesting that the woman's neck is strong and elegant (Longman, 2001:195).[214]

The woman's eyes are compared to the pools of the city of Heshbon in Moab, which were famous for the depth of their beauty. The man's reference to the "Bath Rabbim" is unclear as the meaning and location of this bath is unknown.[215] The woman's nose is further likened to the tower of Lebanon, implying dignity and grandness. The tower of Lebanon was well-known and unique as it protected the city of Damascus (Longman, 2001:196; Assis, 2009:209).

5.4.5.5 Song 7:5

The culmination of this *wasf* is the woman's head and hair. Her head is likened to Mount Carmel "that towers loftily overhead, impressing everyone who sees it" (Assis, 2009:209).[216] Longman (2001:196) suggests that Carmel is the range that extends out into the Mediterranean, south of Acco, creating the impression of the woman standing tall and dignified. In verse 5b, the man likens the woman's hair to the colour purple (דלת ראשך), which was the most expensive dye at the time and was normally reserved for royalty and priestly garments. The woman is thus seen as queen-like – a partner fit for a king (Longman, 2001:196).

The third colon, "a king is held captive in the tresses" (בָּרְהָטִים[218] אָסוּר[217] מֶלֶךְ), is extremely complex. The meaning of the reference to the king is hard to understand, causing great dispute among scholars.[219] The focus on the woman's head in the descriptive poem emphasises its importance (Assis, 2009:210). Longman (2001:198) speculates the woman's hair (a metonymy for her whole being) entraps a king as her beauty is irresistible.

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[214] There are scholars who suggest that the ivory image represents nothing more than the woman's pale complexion (Longman, 2001:195).
[215] Scholars speculate that the word (בַּת־רַבִּים) means "daughters of nobles", parallel to the word (בַּת־נָדִיב) "prince's daughter" in 7:2 (Garrett, 1993:421).
[216] Isaiah 35:2, Jeremiah 46:18, and Amos 9:3 also refer to the glory of Carmel, which is a symbol of dignified height. Scholars list three symbolic values for the word Carmel: 1 – "a symbol of height", 2 – "a symbol of fertility", 3 – "a sacred place" (Assis, 2009:209; cf. Longman, 2001:196).
[217] Stemming from the root of the masculine noun (רַהֲטִים)
[218] Stemming from the root of the masculine noun (רַהֲטִים)
[219] See Assis (2009:210) for further information on the scholarly debate regarding interpretational difficulties.

5.4.5.6 Song 7:6

Song 7:6b seems to echo the words of verse 1 (“How beautiful”). From the beginning of Song 7:1, “the process of the man’s admiration had been focused on the beauty of each one of her features, but now the man admires the woman’s general beauty” (Assis, 2009:212). In Song 7:1-5, the man referred to the woman’s beauty, where in verse 6 he shifts his focus to her pleasing impact on him. The man’s praise of the woman being pleasant is not based on her physical appearance, but rather the pleasant effect she has on him (Assis, 2009:212).

The man furthers his praise through a simple cry of ecstasy, “O love, with your delights!”, as he contemplates a joyous union with the woman. Longman (2001:197) speculates that the noun “delights” can be used for either a human sense of enjoyment, including sensual enjoyment, or a theological sense of delight in God.

5.4.5.7 Song 7:7-9a

In Song 7:7, the man once again provides a summary of the woman’s beauty, yet, he continues the description with a new image: “one that implies action on his part” (Longman, 2001:197). The man likens the woman to a palm tree, since it is tall and impressive, exploding with leaves (fronds) and fruit at the top. The women’s breasts are likened to the fruit of the tree, and the man notes that they are similar to clusters. The fertility of the palm tree is thus represented by its fruit (Longman, 2001:197; Assis, 2009:212). The shift in the man’s description of his beloved’s body, to the depiction of her breasts, expresses his desire for her, which follows in the following verses.

In Song 7:8, the man expresses his desire for his beloved by saying that he wants to climb the palm tree, hold on to its branches, and take hold of its fruit. It is clear that the man wishes to eat from the palm tree’s delightful fruit, enjoying the delights of the woman’s love. One does not need a lot of imagination to note the poem’s suggestive social language as the man figuratively describes his lover’s body and breasts (Longman, 2001:198).

It is of interest to mention that, although the man refers to clusters of dates (the fruit of a palm tree) in his description of his beloved’s breasts verse Song 7:7, the use of the same image refers to clusters of a grape vine in verse Song 7:9. The transition from the palm tree to the grape vines serves as a unique prerogative of poetic expression.

The poet is thus “not bound by the same reality he had described and not even to the same images and metaphors, and thus at the same time he speaks of clusters of the vine, even though he has just located himself on top of the palm tree” (Assis, 2009:213). Longman (2001:198) suggests that the likening of the breasts to a cluster of grapes implies that the woman is well endowed, intoxicating the man with the enjoyment of love.

The man goes on to express his desire for the woman’s apple scented breath,[220] as apples are known for their pleasant scent and function as an aphrodisiac.[221] The man thus desires to become intimate with his beloved while sweet smells enhance his experience (Longman, 2001:198).

In Song 7:9a, the man refers to the woman’s inner mouth, namely the palate, while he continues to express his desire for her. Longman (2001:198) argues that the use of this simile makes the man’s desire to kiss his beloved a public matter. The man’s reference to wine provides insight into his desire for the taste of a deep kiss (Longman, 2001:198).

The man’s senses of taste and smell, as seen in verses Song 7:8 and Song 7:9a, are the main senses involved in the act of love, and indicate a sense of maturity. Assis (2009:213) writes the following regarding the man’s growth in both desire and maturity as it plays a dire role in the use of the man’s senses:

> [T]he man’s proposal to rendezvous with the woman had not received a positive response, and the reason for that had been the man not yet being mature enough for such relations. This lack of maturity was expressed in the absence of the senses of taste and smell… Thus, when the man expresses his desire for the woman, by means of expressions of the senses of taste and smell, this should be regarded as a real expression of desire on the part of the man, and a real advance in the expression of his intimate feelings towards his beloved.

[220] The word is usually translated as nose, nostril, or smell. In the case of this verse, such a translation would not be fitting (Longman, 2001:198). Longman provides further information regarding this word’s translation as “nipple” in his footnotes.
[221] In Song 2:3 and 2:5 apples serve as aphrodisiacs (Longman, 2001:198).

The ending of the man's descriptive poem with words of desire, containing intense and intimate allusions, prompts the woman to respond immediately, as seen in Song 7:9b and 10.

5.5 Conclusion

The full description of the woman's body in the w*asf* songs for instance in Song 7:1-10 reveals an intensely hybridised and disproportioned body – an impossible creature to love. The hybridisation and disproportion of the woman's body portrays a body whose relationship with the world is built by man[222] Black (2009:154) views these hybridised images as troublesome to the body as these images threaten to estrange the female body, bordering on dehumanisation.

The use of images of nature and cycles of life within the Song is intrinsically bound up with matters such as consumption, eating, the use of senses (taste, smell, touch), and possibly even sex. The poet's prevalence of nature imagery in the main body descriptions as seen in the w*asf* poems in Song 4:1-5 and Song 6:4-7, drove the poet to make use of the land's physical contours and its rich, comestible produce, thus assisting the lover in portraying his feelings towards the woman. The grotesque within the poems is deemed readable due to the collocation of various forms of wildlife (e.g. goats, gazelles, sheep, and doves), supported by themes of eating (pomegranates being cut and ready for eating as well as grazing gazelles), architecture (neck as a tower of David), and various references to the lips and the mouth. These themes and images of the grotesque continue throughout the Song as is evident in the body descriptions in Song 7:1-10 (Black, 2009:143).

The initial expression of the grotesque does not only imply bodily enjoyment in excess amount, but also its opposites. In the w*asfs* in Song 4:1-5 and 6:4-7, the images of war, the hunter threatening to devour its prey, and architecture move beyond the reader's expected pastoral and picturesque vision of the Song's poems (Black, 2009:155).[223] As formerly stated, readers visualise what is being described, "at least on some level, before they entertain the interpretive measures necessary to help them

[222] The use of various architectural aspects which gives a manufactured or constructed image of the woman's body, portrays a creation of assemblage (starting with the feet and ending with the head) (Black, 2009:154).
[223] The human invention of war and architecture harbours themes such as alienation, foreigners, and estrangement (Black, 2009:153).

make intellectual and emotional sense of what they read" (Black, 2009:167). Black's reference to "sense" implies that readers become more comfortable with what they read whilst respecting their initial ideas of the Song, its features, and language of love. Readers thus allow their "visual impressions to be translated into impressions, affections, and responses".

The exegesis of Song 7:1-10 provides readers with images such as wine in the navel (or vagina) or kisses gliding over teeth and lips, reminiscent of the images found in the earlier texts of the wa*sfs* in Song 4 and Song 6 (Black, 2009:143). The volatile and grotesque images of the female body are thus portrayed as a body heavy with scent and leaking fluid, suggesting a body sexually aroused or even actively engaging in intercourse. This abundance of liquid imagery suggests sexual fluids such as ejaculation or other fluids and their accompanying odours (Black, 2009:148).

The efficiency of the grotesque in the Song thus depends on keeping the reader or viewer in a marginal state between ugliness and beauty, repulsion and attraction. It is thus clear that, as long as the grotesque is present in the Song, the reader is intimately incorporated into the Song's world (Black, 2009:168). Ultimately, there is no distance between the bodies of the Song's lovers and those of the Song's readers (Black, 2009:186). Therefore, Black argues that the grotesque also implicates readerly desires which appear to be as "fraught with yearning and loss as those of the lovers".

The current chapter thus introduces several ideas about the lovers' relationship and the impact of the grotesque in their midst, as well as the nature of the reader's involvement with the Song. The reader's interaction with lovers' relationship and interaction with the text deeply influences the readerly outcome (Black, 2009:238).

In conclusion, this chapter does not wish to provide a specific conclusion regarding the lovers' relationship and fixed themes, but rather wishes to touch on the lovers' range of possibilities as evoked by the grotesque. The chapter moves through the Song's history of interpretation, discovering scholarly challenges as the Song forces its readers into a highly paradoxical hermeneutical situation. Readers are thus invited to appreciate and partake in a landscape so rich in playful language of desire and sensory that they cannot be limited to a single reconstruction of the *wasf* poems.

Chapter 6

Embodying Desire and Its Challenges

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; For love is as strong as death, jealousy as cruel as the grave; Its flames are flames of fire, a most vehement flame.

(Song of Songs 8: 6 – 7)

6.1 Introduction

The section serves as a coupling of the thesis' former chapters[224], wrestling with answering the question of "so what now?" How does this study help one to aid a congregation ensnared in a patriarchal, Afrikaner traditional community such as Beaufort West to explore and gather a healthy understanding of the authoritarian power hampered in human well-being? How does one help a community such as Beaufort West to gather a healthy and responsible understanding of Biblical studies and themes such as sex, sexuality, gender and desire through the lens of Body Theology and the Song of Songs?

Up and till now, the thesis has introduced the reader to the themes of sex, sexuality and gender, it has shed light on the literary and historical analysis of the Song of Songs; whilst inviting the reader to engage with the theme of Body Theology. The main chapter in the thesis strives to shed extensive light onto the four *Wasf* poems in the Song of Songs, viewed through the lens of Body Theology. This concluding chapter thus serves as the coupling of the thesis, hoping to connect all loose ends found throughout the thesis.

6.2 So What to Do With The Broken History?

In Chapter 4, 'An Embodied Self ', we have seen something of the Christian history's nearly obsessive fixation with the human body, its sexual desire and dynamics. An obsessive fixation that has metamorphosed the body and its passions into serving as the central point in defining "what it means to be human" and "saved", even using spirituality, repression and regulations to gather further understanding on the matter.

[224] Chapters 1,2,3,4 and 5.

(Kamitsuka, 2010:1) It is no overstatement to say that Christianity, even from its formative years, is greatly anti-erotic[225], even slandering the dimension of human relationships where sex was licit[226]. The irony of the theological discomposure regarding sexual desire is the biblical book, Song of Songs, is as Kamitsuka (2010:2) says it well, "a book dripping with erotically charged energy between a yearning young woman and her virile lover". A book challenging Christianity's viewing of purity, sacredness and its sexual theology.

The Church's effort to channel and even control human desire continued up and till the early modern period. In the 1970's with the rise of gay pride and women's liberation movements, various churches and organisations strived to consolidate desire, traditional family values[227], homosexuality, sexual activities such as masturbation and fornication. Yet Christianity finds itself in a position where the body but not its pleasures is embraced, indicating to the reality that Christianity's central sacramental practices[228] develops and revolves around the body. It is thus of interest to mention that Christianity's ritual embrace of bodies is accentuated by images of sinful, defiled and gendered bodies and holy souls. (Kamusika, 2010:3, 5-6)

It is with dualistic challenges[229] in mind that the role of gender perceptions is in need of addressing. Due to duality's intersectionality with the complex and challenging relation with the body, it results in mixed emotions regarding eroticism and misogyny. Kamisuka (2010:6) sheds attributive light on the "so-called desserts fathers" disturbed view of women, perceiving them to be devils "coming to tempt them sexually in the form of a woman." (2010:6). Gender's intersectionality[230] with dualism contributed to

[225] The term 'Eros' stems from the name of the Greek god of love 'Eros' associated with pleasure, most dominantly sexual pleasure, yet Christianity does not share in the acknowledgement of other Gods.
[226] Kamitsuka (2010:2) writes that even the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther thought along patristic lines arguing for the sinfulness of sexual desire though it was permissible in marriage where it was excused by God's grace.
[227] Implying heterosexual and patriarchal marriages (Kamitsuka, 2010:3).
[228] Kamutsika (2010:5) defines the sacramental practices as the Eucharist, the giving of the last rites, "the laying on of the hands in rituals of healing", as well as other practices of material religion, consolidating bodies as a centrality to Christian rituals.
[229] As thoroughly discussed in the fourth chapter, namely Body Theology.
[230] Jennifer Nash describes intersectionality as a primary analytical tool used by feminist and anti-racial scholars to exploit oppression and theorising identity. It is the primary theoretical tool designed to confront hegemony, feminist hierarchy and exclusivity by reinforcing gender, class, race and sexuality (Nash, 2008:1& 2).

the later medieval female mystics' maltreatment of their bodies to the point of so-called "holy anorexia". (Kamutsika, 2010:6)

Whether it is through ethnographic investigations of certain bodily practices or phenomenological analyses of embodiment, it is clear that theological writings has undergone transformation by centralising human experience as a reflection of Christ, God, salvation and the church. Kamutsika (2010:8) argues that the amalgamation of postmodern modes of reflection and gender analysis provides the possibilities needed to focus on experience, creating the needed space for a growing theological embrace of issues regarding sexual desire and other uncharted waters.

6.3 A Theological Embrace of Desire

Contributing to the theological embrace of desire and experience, is Jensen's (2010: 22) biblical approach of reading the Bible as a narrative of desire, arguing that the Bible expresses various relationships: humanity's relationship with God, creation's relationship with God as well as God's election of a nation so that they can be in a particular relation with God (Jensen 2010:22). The readers' glimpse of divine desire thus introduces them to their full participation in desire as everything in creation is contingent and made to be in relationship with God and creation. Jensen (2010:22) writes the following regarding God and desire:

> God creates not out of lack of desire but out of the desire for others to be, a desire that is fulfilled by the word of breath. The breath of God that stirs all to life in creation breathes through human beings. The opening word of divine desire in the Bible, then, can become the basis for reframing some contemporary understandings of desire.

God's creation of desire, is created so that humanity will desire God[231], it is conceived to stem from a feeling of emptiness and internal hunger, creating the reality of absence that can only be filled by clinging to one another with the hope of becoming whole. (Jensen, 2010:22). Walsh (2010: 8) similarly argues that human experience gravitates towards all that is pleasurable, enhancing and nourishing for the human capacity for

[231] Henriksen adds to Jensen's argument of God's creation of desire by writing that God does not need humans as His desire for humanity is due to God's desire for the good of humanity, "desiring that we participate in the community and in the goodness, beauty, and justice of which God is the source." (2011:21). God's desire for humanity is thus embodiment.

joy. Moreover, Schults (2011:viii) adds that humans are not saved from bodily experiences but rather through and in them.

It is thus at this point that the biblical book of Song of Songs comes into play as it portrays bodies meant for lingering, tasting, feeding and touching (Jensen, 2010:27). It is of importance to mention that the Song neither implores its readers to gloss over the books portrayal of sex, dripping from its pages, nor does it encourage its readers to understand sex "only as an end in itself" (Jensen, 2010:28). Jensen (2010:28) argues that the Song intends a comparison: "God's desire for humanity is like a lover's desire for the beloved, body and soul, a desire to touch, commune, be close, enter into, make room for and taste", as is humanity's desires' for one another. The Song of Songs offers its readers more than a mere enactment of desire as it lays bare desire's impact in human life. The Song thus "offers a depth charge into the nature of desire, one that modern believers can learn from as much as the ancient Israelite must have" (Walsh, 2000:3). Jensen (2010:28) contributes to the beauty of sex and desire by writing that the notion of knowing and being known even when referring to God, is a matter of absence, serving as an invitation of comparing God's love with the beauty, pleasure and taste of the known, mainly sex.

Walsh (2010:8) argues that desire burns within every human heart throughout the ages. The nature of the erotic in human existence is deeply intertwined with the theme of freedom. Embodied life and freedom is essentially erotic, implying that humans deserve, need and have the right to freely experience erotically filled lives, with as little limits as possible (Jungling, 2010:218). The experience of desire is accumulated by the dialectics of presence and absence[232], taking the erotica in sexuality a step further (Lakeland, 2010:249).

6.3.1 The Inevitable Challenge of Absence/Presence in Desire.

Desire is challenged by its reality of being powered by absence, lacking possession and constant revaluation of what has been, what it is not and the constant yearning for satisfaction[233] (Lakeland, 2010:251). Biblical Hebrew is not restricted by a single term for "desire", instead it employs a variety of verbs as to illustrate 'want and need'.

[232] The theme of absence will receive further attention in Chapter 4 of this thesis.
[233] "Desire is about wanting more than it is about getting. It is the hunger that highlights the food; the patience that highlights the faith; the arousal that anticipates the sex. It commands a shift in perspective" (Wash, 2010:21).

Verbs such as ‘seek’, ‘want’, ‘yearn’, ‘delight in’, ‘ask for’ and ‘long for’ (Walsh, 2000:25). Desire is thus the edge between wanting and satisfaction, a never-ending challenge. (Walsh, 2010:21)

Roland Boer adds to Lakeland’s identification of absence, stating that desire in itself is inevitably substituted to the pain of absence/presence (2000:278). The inevitable presence of absence/presence in desire gives way to reading the Song of Songs through the lens of “fantasy”, giving rise to role of pornography[234] in the Song of Songs (Boer, 2000: 284). Boer theorises the following regarding pornography and its role in desire (2000: 286).

> Rather, it stimulates phantasy, inciting desire through such phantasy that it cannot be unsatisfied in the usual understanding of sexual fulfilment. In fact, might it not be suggested that the phantasy is itself the prime sexual experience-insofar it perpetuates desire itself-rather than the poor substitute of real partners?

Boer (2000:286) raises a relevant question given the fact that there are many scholars and lay believers who struggle to bridge the gap between the concept of pornography, fantasy and biblical desire. Boer moreover propagates the retention of pornography, stating that the flesh-and-blood fulfilment of desire is only a temporary substitute for the thing of desire itself (Boer, 2000:286). It is thus fitting to say that pornography (from Boer’s perspective) serves as an advantageous option in addressing the never-ending challenge of desire.

Walsh (2000:22) does not share in Boer’s rather outlandish contributions towards desire when writing that desire, as well as yearning differs from fantasy, as fantasy is an unrealistic escapist journey “with little or no chance of being enjoyed within the parameters of one’s life” (Walsh, 2000: 22). Desire, unlike fantasy, sprouts from the previous enjoyment of pleasure after which it is honed by the constant absence of pleasure. Fantasy only comes into play when part of the continued pleasure stems from the replay of the bodily sensations and the familiarity thereof. (Walsh, 2000:23)

[234] Nicki Spies (2010:xii) writes that the word “pornography” stems from the Greek word “*porne*”, referring to a prostitute, while the word “*graphein*” means “too write”. In the time of the Greco-Romans’ there where prostitutes who kept journals of their sexual encounters with their clients, giving life to the word “pornography”.

Spies (2010:xiii) agrees with Boer's understanding of pornography and fantasy, writing that its only goal is to create excessive sexual stimulation[235]. Both erotica and pornography trade in fantasy: erotica builds up to an action, filled with wanting and emotions, while pornography is emotionally flat, arousing sexual excitement by repetition of sexual acts (Walsh, 2000:43 & 44).

Contrary to pornography and its inevitable marketing of absence/presence, desire's goal is not to create excessive sexual stimulation, but rather to encourage human sensuality (Spies, 2010:xiii). F. LeRon Shults' (2011:vii) provides further insight into desire by writing that desire also needs to be understood as a liberating force connected to the uplifting and enlightening experience of grace as desire is deeply rooted in human life[236]. Yet it is of interest to mention that desire is not a primitive biological notion, nor is it a result of involuntary biological impulses, but is rather the way in which a human person relates to the world, "expressing a type of intentionality that conditions human existence" and the wants and wills that humans articulate (Henriksen, 2011:2)[237].

Desire is thus not just an element of awareness commandeered by intellectuality but rather exists in the world as the world is in relation with the human body and its perception[238]. Humans can thus does not rouse their own desire as it is the other who awakens it, affirming that desire is that which happens to a person. (Henriksen, 2011:2).

6.4 Bringing the Embodied Self To The Light

Humanity's desire is faced with the challenge of longevity, causing the dilemma of a never-ending reality of unsatisfied desires. Human evolutions development of basic desires as a phenomenon of never-ending dissatisfaction has encouraged the growth of consumerism (Henriksen, 2011:6). The rise of consumerist shaped desire, taps into

[235] Spies (2010:xiii) also sheds light on the darker side of pornography and fantasy by arguing for its dehumanisation of the participants. Exploitation and abuse is also not a foreign friend throughout the filming of pornographic material.
[236] Gilbert Meilander (2009:12) believes that human beings are defined by the fact they "carry out" a purpose. "Purpose is embedded at the heart of a living being's needy freedom; it is objectively there, embedded in the very nature of things. Meilander (2009:12) strengthens his argument by stating that a human's appetite of desire serves as their deepest principle of life, not their DNA.
[237] Henriksen argues that desire is integrated in humanity's embodied direction towards the self and the world, "a moment in my being-in-the world" (2011:2).
[238] When humans are alienated from themselves and their true desire, they also suffer from a distorted relationship with the world as they fail to understand how desire connects and relates to the world.

the evolutionary history of human biology, suggesting two different types of desire, firstly is the biological and psychological desire of "need"[239], needing food, water, safety, response from others and so forth. Secondly is the socially and culturally constructed desire of "want"[240], wanting more than what is needed. Humanity's reaction on desire and the search for complete satisfaction thus brings the embodied self to the fore. (Henriksen, 2011:8)

The acquirement of the embodied self is of great importance in the fulfilment of human well-being as it exploits humanity to the element of vulnerability[241] by manner of disclosing biological and psychological desires (Henriksen, 2011:10). Boer writes that desire is not merely generated through images, but also through the body of the other, which is where the role of self-consciousness and identification comes into play. Boer (2000:278) argues that it is only by "assimilating oneself to the body of the other that people recognise themselves as bodies". The reality of vulnerability is thus intertwined with the recognition of the other and the embodied.

6.4.1 The Healing Nature of Desire's Vulnerability.

Nico Koopman in his article on "Hope, Vulnerability and Disability" defines vulnerability by means of two dimensions: in the first instance defining vulnerability as "the threat of unveiled needs". Humans are constantly under physical, spiritual, social and theological threats of unmet needs.

The second dimension that Koopman (2013:43) identifies focuses on the element of suffering in vulnerability, where human needs are not met, as humans experience various forms of suffering such as social, and teleological unmet needs. Humanity is thus predisposed to various forms of suffering as they are all "frail and fragile and can be easily wronged and hurt" (Koopman, 2013:43). The fragility of human life and well-being thus gives way to the liberation of desire and its vulnerability[242]. Desire and its

[239] Henriksen describes the desire of "needs" as closed desire as it closes humans off from anything other than what is already present in their quest for satisfaction (2011:8).
[240] The desire of "wants" is described as open desires as it requires that humans participate in more than a biological world (Henriksen, 2011:9).
[241] Nico Koopman (2013:43) states that the notion of vulnerability is used in a variety of ways as vulnerability means that humans are at risk, facing the threat to suffer. "We are predisposed to various forms of suffering. We are frail and fragile and can easily be wronged and hurt" (Koopman, 2013:43).
[242] Desire's vulnerability is interconnected with human well-being as the enjoyment of desire is to exist in a trusting relation through which an individual can grow (Henriksen, 2011:27). Desire in itself is a complex subject, affecting all spectrums of human life, giving way to the grotesque, vulnerable, perverse and even erotic elaborations of the human body. Human beings are not perfect and is thus confronted

vulnerability only achieves full liberation when a person comes to know their deepest self, reaching a point where human identity is at one with God with whom humans live and move in (Henriksen, 2011:27). Henriksen (2011:28) writes the following regarding God and human desire:

> To enjoy my desire and to enjoy the other's desire for me is to exist in a trusting relation in which I can grow. That is what happens when I can see myself as desired by God and relate to God in my own desiring faith. Summing this up, we can see that the "Other of desire" is the "place holder" of God. By harbouring desire, we get an incarnal experience of what it means to have the image of God as our destiny.

Henriksen (2011:28) clearly argues that God's allowance of desire accompanied by humanity's relation to it, is in a profound sense related to the reality of God. Kamitsuka (2010:11) challenges scholars such as Walsh's positive viewing of desire and vulnerability, when writing that humanity's relationship with God and the upholding of Christian views of desire does not insure any healing of that which ails the contemporary consumerist and voyeuristic cultural infatuation with titillation. Kamitsuka (2010:11) states that humans need to add a psychological analysis of desire as a product of the often-conflicted psychosexual human development, hoping to achieve the luxury of imaging desire as the ideal salve for a healthy human well-being.

The healing of humanity's psychosexual wounds is of great importance as desire imparts an important hermeneutical impact on humanity's ability to interpret life whilst gaining adequate access to the phenomena suited for leading a healthy human well-being (Henriksen, 2011:3). Boer (2000:297) does not share in Henriksen nor Kamitsuka's description of desire as a possible salve for healing psychosexual wounds, stating that the prime purpose of desire is not the fulfilment thereof, but rather the eternal prolonging of desire itself. It is thus clear that desire in itself is a complex

with the reality of desire's vulnerability and humanity's dependence upon others as life exposes human beings to various experiences (LeRon Schultz & Henriksen, 2011:19). The idea of human well-being is funnelled down to meaning no more than leading an experimentally satisfying life, stating that all that truly matters is the experience of sources of satisfaction (Volf, 2011:57&58).

subject, affecting all spectrums of human life, giving way to the grotesque, vulnerable, perverse and even erotic elaborations of female and male bodies[243].

Human beings should constantly be reminded of the importance of vulnerability in order to provide opportunities to experience and acknowledge the deeply shared connections with one another. Connections indicating the basic web of hyper sensitive mutual dependence which can so easily be distorted (Reynolds, 2008:14). The freedom of love and desire is excellent as it risks suffering in a world riddled with violence and injustice. Love and desire do not regret the price it pays in making itself vulnerable, "but to speak of paying a price is in itself to acknowledge that the suffering itself is an evil. Vulnerability, on the other hand, is a perfection of loving freedom" (Placher, 1994:19).

6.5 So How Do We Do It Differently?

It was argued in this thesis that, in essence, the Song of Songs is a spiritual book, concerning itself with the soul's response to life and its pleasures. As such, the Song "is neither secular nor religious, since these are modern categories and carriers of dualism" (Walsh, 2000:191). The Song finds a middle ground, whilst filling the gaping hole of physical and spiritual yearning.

The constant reality of God's absence in the Song of Songs should not be addressed by means of a type of scavenger hunt, hunting for a gap to force God into the text, but should rather be approached by means of asking "what the absence of divine referents itself can mean theologically" (Walsh, 2000:192). The discernment of the Song's spiritual dimension is thus undoubtedly the most rewarding part of Biblical studies, as a unity between sexual impulses and spirituality provides healing to the rift between sex and religion, the body and spirit. The Song and its unabashed focus on desire thus provides its readers who are emotionally splintered by religion, with a much-needed remedy (Walsh, 2000:193).

The Song of Songs and its hidden spirituality calls its readers to notice as well as to participate in the wonders of a complex and delightfully flourishing life (Walsh, 2000:215). Yet accessing such a delightfully full life is not easy to come by as human well-being is not easily obtainable. Only by obtaining an informed understanding of the

[243] As seen in Chapter 5's discussion of the Song of Song and its *wasf* texts.

themes of sex, sexuality, gender and Body Theology, will individuals collect the much-needed tools for a responsible approach and application of biblical texts. It is only after obtaining such tools that a Biblical book such as the Song of Songs can constructively shape and infiltrate human lives.

Humanity's distorted understanding of the body seeps into all corners of human life, creating a blanket of deadly silence, hanging over sex, sexuality and gender as seen throughout the centuries. This deadly silence has pushed sex and sexuality over the edge and into the categorisation of sinfulness. This deadly silence exposes society's actual trauma regarding history's distortedly shaped sex, sexuality and gender (Spies, 2012:119). Kaethe Weingarten (2004:14) writes the following regarding silence and its role in society:

> Silence is a key mechanism by which trauma in one generation is communicated to the next. Silence can communicate a wealth of meanings. It is its own map: Don't go there; don't say that; don't touch; too much; to little; this hurts; this doesn't. But why the territory is as it is cannot be read from the map of silence.

The reality of this deadly silence and distorted understanding of the bodyself, sex, sexuality and gender in a small town such as Beaufort West, is overwhelming. The town of Beaufort West is not overwhelmed by this deadly silence, but rather by its distorted portrayal of sex, sexuality, gender, the bodyself and most importantly, human well-being. The distortedness within the small patriarchal town is overwhelming and in dire need of transformation.

It is this point that an informed and responsible understanding of the Song of Songs read through the lens of Body Theology can provide the community of Beaufort West, and its various communities, with the formation and transformation it needs. Inspiring the community and its believers to be formed, challenged and transformed[244].

The dominating patriarchal structures in the community of Beaufort West rely very strongly on traditional norms, rules and ideology (Ratele, 2013:133). The reality of

[244] It is of importance to mention that this statement takes a leap of twenty centuries, situating itself in a context socially, religiously, culturally, physically and politically far removed from the ancient Near East.

gender inequality in Beaufort West has not only manifested itself in religious, economic and social inequality, but has also fuelled the constant dilemma of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in the small town. Striving for transformation in this small town is thus a high priority. The transformation proses need not be aggressive as even a single word, phrase, or observation can spark an interest, encouraging individuals to question and even alter the values and ideas with which they were raised (Sewpaul, 2013:119). A subtle approach and application of transformation holds the power to intellectually and emotionally transform individuals. Johnson[245] (1999:11) argues that social categories only exist as they are fed by members of society agreeing on what is real, continuing to be committed to that very perception.

Unmaking and remaking the constraints of society and a patriarchal community such as Beaufort West will not be an easy transformation, but is needed. This study has sketched the number of intellectual, informative and traditional hurdles which the community of Beaufort West needs to overcome in the hope of reaching the point of a well-being. The practical side of bringing transformation to this community will undoubtedly be challenging as no transformation is without resistance.

6.6 Conclusion

In conclusion to this thesis, the practical side of bringing transformation to the community of Beaufort West, does not only rest on the DRC's work towards embracing and understanding the various benefits of Body Theology and startlingly complex themes such as sex, sexuality and gender. It rests on the DRC's responsibility of equipping its congregants with the needed tools to wrestle with a Biblical book such as the Song of Songs. A book willing to challenge its readers comfort zones, understanding of the bodily self and relationship with God, the natural world and other human beings. A book willing to address both physical and spiritual wounds through the healing lens of Body Theology, journeying with its readers to the point of gaining well-being (Walsh, 2000:192). A physical and spiritual healthy life. As Walsh (2000:ix & xiv) reminds us: "We all have desires, sexual and otherwise, our lives and any faith we muster, we must become literate about desire. If we deny or giggle, we choke off the one avenue that God does speak, in our longings."

[245] See Johnson (1999:11-12) for a further illustration and discussion of the existence of social categories.

The DRC is thus encouraged too boldly speak of Biblical books such as the Songs of Songs, highlighting its various themes whilst walking the exegetical road with its congregants. Educating congregants of a healthy Body Theology, our bodyselves, sex, sexuality, gender and also desire is not optional, for failing to do so, robs people from the possibility of flourishing in their well-being.

Hosting various workshops on Body-and-Sexual Theology at schools, youth centrums, social service organisations such as Badisa as well as mobilising projects funded by AGRI-SA, will undoubtedly have a vital impact on the transformation of the patriarchal, tradition bound community of Beaufort West. Before leaving Beaufort West for my current position as minister in Mosselbay, this is exactly what I have done. Hopefully this work continues as evident also in this current thesis that argued for helping congregations to embrace a healthy understanding of sex, sexuality, gender and desire.

It is in the embodiment of Body Theology, that the Song of Songs in the midst of all its complexities, eroticism and desire[246] can provide guidance as well as challenges to both its scholarly and "ordinary readers". Stuart and Thatcher (1997:227) state that sexual experience, by the grace of God, provides a way to gain well-being, as Godly love is deeply manifested in human love. These movements participating in human sexuality, moving from the self to the other, are nothing else but the movement of God's love caught up in creation (Stuart and Thatcher, 1997:227).

I thus conclude this thesis by stating that human well-being is rooted in living a satisfying life. It is by placing sex, sexuality, gender, desire and a healthy understanding of Body Theology at the centre of human well-being, while coupling it to the theology of God's love for humanity, that believers attain joy, hope and vulnerability whilst living a satisfying and healthy life (Volf, 2010:10).

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[246] Desire through everything may be understood as the pursuit of fulfilment that forever falls short (Boer, 2000: 276). Walsh (2000:3) states that the Song of Songs is without a doubt a depth charge into the nature of desire itself, one that all modern readers can learn from.

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